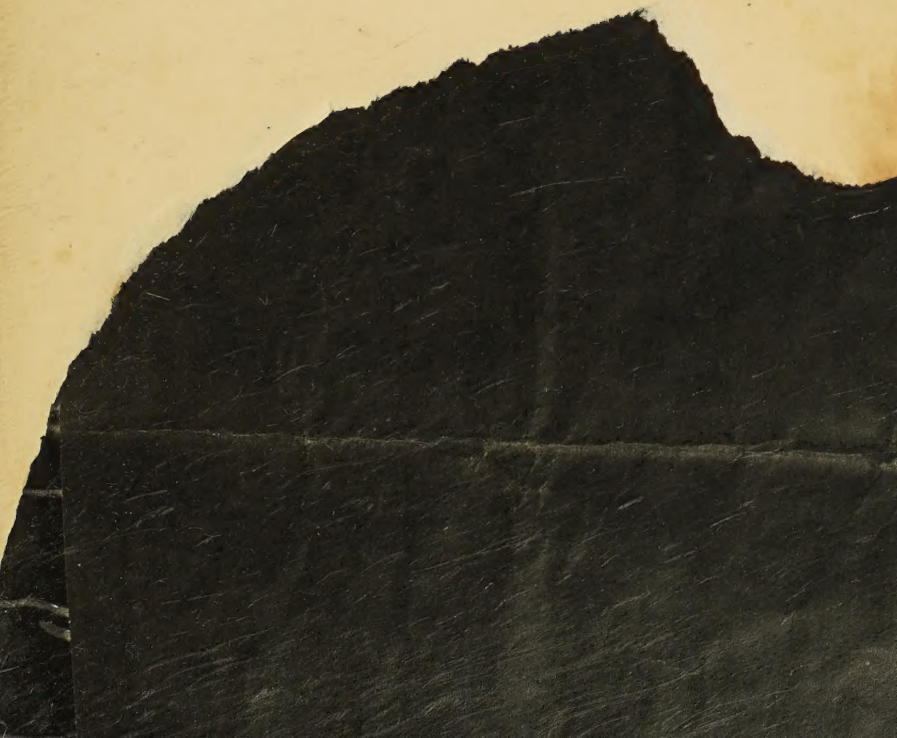
THE DAZZLING MISS DAVISON

BY THE AUTHOR OF THE HOUSE ON THE MARSH

"A Christmas gift
to Mother,—
From Seward and Irene.

"Dec. 1915."



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BY

FLORENCE WARDEN

AUTHOR OF
THE HOUSE ON THE MARSH

With Photogravure
Frontispiece in Color

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THE DAZZLING MISS DAVISON

CHAPTER I

A roomy, comfortable, old-fashioned house in Bayswater, with high windows, big rooms, and little balconies just big enough to hold a wealth of flowers in summer and a very pretty show of evergreens when the season for flowers was past.

On October a row of asters, backed up by a taller row of foliage plants, made the house look bright and pretty, and the young faces that appeared at the windows of the drawing-room made it prettier still.

Mr. and Mrs. Aldington, the occupiers of the house, thought that there was nothing pleasanter in life than the gayety of young people, and so, as they had only two children, a son and a daughter, both grown up, they gave a general invitation to the younger generation, of which, particularly on a Sunday afternoon and evening, the contemporaries of their son and daughter were not slow to avail themselves.

Especially was it the pleasure of these good-

hearted people to extend hospitality to those young folks whose lives were, for one reason or another, not so bright as those of their own children. And many a friendless young barrister waiting for a brief, young doctor struggling for a practice, and many a girl whose parents had a hard time of it in keeping up a fair position on an unfairly small income, found recreation and a warm welcome at the old-fashioned house in Bayswater.

Some of them found more than that. Gerard Buckland, for instance, a clever young barrister who was tired of hearing of the great things he was to do some day, since he was unable to get even small things to do to go on with, found at the Aldingtons something that he had stoutly resolved to do without until he had "got on."

He found, in other words, his "ideal."

It was on a bright Sunday afternoon, when the big drawing-room was full of lively people, mostly young, and all talking at once, that Gerard, having been introduced by Arthur Aldington two Sundays previously, took advantage for the third time of the general invitation given him by the host and hostess, and found himself surrounded by a dozen people among whom he knew no one except the Aldingtons themselves.

Whereupon Rose, the daughter of the house, made him sit by her, and, as he was shyly looking over a basketful of loose photographs which he had found

on a table beside him, undertook the task of showman, and told him all about the pictures as he looked at them one by one.

It chanced that the second picture he picked up after Rose's arrival was the portrait of a girl which attracted him at once.

"What an interesting face!" said he, as he looked at the photograph.

"And she's an interesting girl too!" said Rose, who was a plain, amiable young woman of six-and-twenty, whom everybody liked and nobody had as yet chosen. "She's the daughter of a Colonel, who speculated, and then died and left his wife and two girls with scarcely anything to live upon. Papa says it's one of the saddest stories he knows. They've gone to live in a cottage somewhere, after living in one of the most beautiful houses you ever saw in the country, and having a flat in town as well."

Gerard Buckland was looking intently at the photograph, which was that of a quite young woman with an oval face, delicate features, and an expression which combined vivacity with intelligence.

"She looks very clever," he said.

"Yes, so she is — and very pretty too."

"Yes, very, very pretty."

He was fascinated; and when he was compelled to look at other photographs, he placed that of the girl whose story he had just heard at the side of the basket, in such a position that he could glance at it

again from time to time, and amuse himself by speculating about this girl who was so handsome, so clever, and so unlucky.

Rose Aldington noticed his preoccupation with the picture, and said, with a smile —

"I see you admire her, just as everyone else does."

"I was thinking the story a sad one," said Gerard, rather confused at being discovered in his act of adoration.

"Oh, well, perhaps she'll marry well, and her sister too, and then it will be all right. The sister is even better-looking than Ra— than she is, and just as nice. Only unluckily she hadn't finished growing up when their father died, so she hasn't had the benefit of such a good education as the elder."

"It's hard upon a girl, though, when she has to marry just for money," observed Gerard.

"Oh, yes, of course. And I'm not sure that this particular girl would do it either. But that's the usual thing to say, isn't it, when a very pretty girl is left unexpectedly poor?"

"Yes."

Gerard answered quite shortly, and looked at the photograph again. And at that moment the door opened, and an exclamation rose to his lips as he recognized in the new arrival the very girl whose picture he held in his hand.

He felt the blood rush to his face as he looked at

her. He saw at once that the absence of color from the photograph had given him an altogether wrong impression of what the girl herself would be like. She was of medium height, slender, pale, brown-haired, brown-eyed, and her dress was plain almost to dowdiness.

But she carried herself so well, her figure was so graceful, her expression so intelligent, and her smile so charming, that she attracted instinctive attention in greater measure than any of the other girls in the room.

"Rachel!" cried Mrs. Aldington.

"Miss Davison!" cried her son Arthur at the same moment.

And the new-comer was brought into the group near the fire and surrounded, while Gerard Buckland, at a little distance, listened to the tones of her voice, and approved of them as he had done of every detail concerning her.

Only one thing about her seemed amiss. Well as she wore her plain, almost shabby clothes, neat and graceful as she looked in them, Gerard felt that they were not the clothes which she ought to be wearing, that her beauty demanded a better setting than the plain serge skirt, the black jacket, the gray felt mushroom hat with its trimming of a quill and a big black rosette, which, though they became her, were not quite smart enough either for the occasion or for her own type of womanhood.

Gerard saw the glance of Rose Aldington wander in his direction with a sly look, and he hoped she would not forget to find an opportunity to introduce him to the interesting guest.

He was not disappointed. Before tea was brought in, Rose had contrived the introduction, and Gerard found himself in conversation with the girl whom he felt to be the nearest he had yet met to the sort of floating ideal of what is most gracious in woman, which he, in common with most young men, carried about in his mind, ready to crystallize into the face and form of some human, breathing, living girl.

As she interested him, so did he, perhaps, interest her. The tall, shy, handsome fair man of five-and-twenty, who spoke so softly, but who looked as if his voice could be heard in other and stronger tones upon occasion, and of whom it had been whispered in her ear by Rose that he was "so clever, bound to make a name for himself at the bar," was pleasant to look upon and to listen to, and the two young people, in that pleasant twilight which Mrs. Aldington loved, and which she would not too soon have broken in upon by gas and candles, soon began to find that they had many things to say to each other, as they sipped tea and nibbled cake, to the accompaniment of the other gay young voices, in the illumination of the leaping firelight.

Somebody had drawn the talk of the whole room

into the old channel of woman's rights and position, and immediately the whole company had broken up into interested little couples and groups to discuss it with the same freshness of interest as if it had never been discussed before.

Rachel Davison was rather bitter about it.

"It's all very well to talk," she said, "about the right of woman to act for herself, and to make a position for herself, and the rest of it. But you want more than the right: you must have the power. And that is what we shall never get," she added, with a sigh.

Gerard argued with her.

"Why shouldn't they have the power?" he said. "When once the barriers of prejudice are pulled down, what's to prevent a woman from entering any field where she feels her talents will be best employed?"

She raised her eyebrows.

"When once the barriers of prejudice are broken down!" echoed she. "But that will be never. You don't recognize how strong they are! Why, look at my mother, for instance; she's more particular about little things, prejudices and that sort of thing, than about important ones. And she's not alone, she's one of a type, the most common type. She would rather see her daughters dead, I'm quite sure, than engaged in any occupation which she's been accustomed to think unwomanly."

"But she belongs to the last generation. We go on enlarging our ideas. You, for instance, don't agree with her, I can see."

"Not in everything, certainly; though I agree with her enough to sympathize with her, and to wish that the world were just as she sees it, with plenty of work for all, and work of the pleasantest kind — work that one could engage in without loss of dignity, and with credit to oneself."

"There's plenty of such work to be found now. What about the dignity of labor?"

"All very well in theory, but quite a mistake in practice. At any rate, there's nothing dignified about any calling which I, for example, could find to follow. Now poor mamma thinks it's all right, that one has only to look about to find ways of utilizing what she calls one's talents, and to make heaps of money by them."

"Perhaps she's right after all. I'm sure you wouldn't be long in finding an opening for yours, if you wanted one."

"What makes you say that? At least I know. Of course, it's the sort of thing a man must say to a woman. But, as a matter of stern fact, I haven't any talents, and for a woman without to look for remunerative and dignified labor is just the most appalling waste of time imaginable."

"I'm quite sure you have talents, only perhaps you don't recognize them yourself yet."

"What makes you speak so certainly, when I tell you I have not?"

Gerard hesitated.

"I'm not quite sure whether I dare tell why. The thing I should have to say, if I were to tell the truth, is the sort of thing some ladies as young as you don't care to hear."

He looked at her with shy interest, and she, alert and inquisitive, insisted upon his explaining.

"Whether I like to hear it or not, I must know what you mean," she said, with charming imperiousness.

"Well, then, Miss Davison, you look — may I say it? —'brainy.'"

She nodded, smiling.

"I've been told that before, but the look is deceptive. I'm only just not quite an idiot. I can't do anything — except one thing that I don't think I'll own to," she added, with a laugh.

"Let me put you through a short catechism. Can't you play? — the piano, I mean."

"Not even well enough to get through the accompaniment of a song at sight, or to play an easy piece that I haven't diligently practiced till the family is tired to death of it."

"Can't you paint?"

"Oh, yes, I can copy drawing-master's pictures, which are like nothing in heaven or earth or the water under the earth."

"You can sing, I feel sure."

"Yes, I can, but you have to sit very near the piano to hear me."

"Then you have some other accomplishments which you have concealed from me," said Gerard, affecting a judicial frown.

Miss Davison laughed merrily.

"Well, I have one, but wild horses shan't drag from me what it is. And, if you knew, you would not advise me to use it."

"Come, come, I must have complete confession. No half-way measures. Let me see if I can't suggest a way of utilizing this mysterious accomplishment."

She laughed, blushed crimson, and suddenly opening her hand, showed him, lying flat on the palm, a little silver pencil-case, at sight of which he uttered an exclamation.

"Why, that's mine, isn't it?" said he. "How did you —"

He stopped, she laughed, and Rose Aldington, who was sitting near, joined in her mirth, which was of rather a shamefaced kind.

"Showing off again, Rachel?" she said.

Miss Davison laughed, gave the pencil case back to Gerard, and said, with a demure look —

"There! that's my best accomplishment. I flatter myself I can pick pockets with any amateur living.

Now you wouldn't recommend me to take to that as a livelihood, would you?"

He was amused, almost dismayed, but protested earnestly that there must be a hundred ways in which such exceeding dexterity could be profitably exercised without having recourse to the profession she suggested.

But, in the meantime, Rose Aldington having drawn the attention of the rest of the people in the room to Rachel's accomplishment, she was called upon to give another exhibition of her skill, and this she did in various ways, transferring trifles from the mantelpiece to the table and back again so quickly and cleverly that the eye could not follow her movements, and performing other little feats requiring extreme delicacy of touch and quickness of eye, until they all told her she would make her fortune if she were to set up as a conjurer.

Gerard, however, was more deeply interested than the rest. He learned from her that she performed these various tricks without ever having been taught conjuring, and he argued from this that, if she were only to train her special faculties in some given direction, she could not fail to become exceedingly expert.

"I should have thought," he said, "that you would make a very clever milliner, with your wonderfully light touch."

Miss Davison sighed.

"I believe I should," she said; "but my mother won't hear of it. Prejudice again! And I daresay that the talent which seems extraordinary when it is untrained, would turn out quite commonplace if I were to be pitted, at any calling such as millinery, against those who have for years been brought up to it."

"I don't think so," said Gerard. "Indeed, I'm sure you do yourself an injustice. Your lightness of hand and quickness of eye are quite remarkable. And the wonderful way in which you move, so that you get from one place to another without being seen on the way, if I may so express it, reminds one rather of a bird than of the average solid, stolid thing we call a human being."

Miss Davison was amused, rather pleased, by his evident enthusiasm, and when he modestly and stammeringly expressed a hope that she would let him know if she decided to make any practical use of her talents, she told him that when she and her mother came to town, she would ask him to go and see them.

"At present," she added, "we are living quite in the country, and we can't receive any visitors because my mother is not well enough."

"And how shall I know — through the Aldingtons — when you come to town?" asked Gerard eagerly.

"Oh, yes; they will know before anyone. Mrs. Aldington is such a dear, and so is her husband; and

so, for that matter, are Arthur and Rose. Yes, whenever we come up, and wherever we settle, they will know our address at once."

When Miss Davison rose to go, Gerard Buckland was not long in following her. He came up with her before she reached the corner of the street, and begged to be allowed to see her to the station.

But she refused, saying quite gently that she must get used to going about alone, and that it was the first step towards women's rights.

He looked pained.

"I should have been so very grateful to you if you had let me call upon you!" he said humbly, wistfully.

Her face grew grave.

"No," she said; "I can't do that. The plain truth is that my mother has not yet got over a terrible change in circumstances which we've suffered not long ago, and she can't bear that anyone should see us in what is practically a workman's cottage. Prejudice again, of course, but it has to be considered."

"May I hope for the pleasure of meeting you again at the Aldingtons?"

"Oh, yes, I'm often there. I shall be very pleased to see you again when I go there."

She gave him her hand and he was obliged to bid her good-bye and leave her.

But the impression she had made upon him was so strong, deepened, no doubt, by the circumstances in

which she was placed, and also, perhaps, by her resolute attitude which was neither coquetry nor prudery, but simply pride, that he could scarcely think of anything for the next few days but the pale oval face and the big brown eyes, alternately gay and grave, and the soft voice that was different from the voices of other girls.

He went to the Aldingtons assiduously after that, always hoping to meet Miss Davison again. But each time he was disappointed, and at last he grew ashamed of calling so often, and of being so dull when he was there, and absented himself for a couple of months from the old-fashioned Bayswater house and its gay circle.

Then he called again, but only to hear that nothing had been seen or heard of the Davisons for some time. At last, six months after his meeting with Rachel, and while the remembrance of her face, her voice, and her quietly outspoken opinions was still fresh upon him, Gerard met Arthur Aldington one day in the Strand and was at once reproached for neglecting them.

Gerard made excuses, and asked after Miss Davison.

Arthur's face changed.

"I don't know what's happened to them," said he, with a perplexed look. "I haven't seen anything of any of them till a day or two ago. And then"

. . . He checked himself, and said, "You were quite gone on Rachel, weren't you?"

"I admired her immensely," said Gerard. "I wanted to see her again, but she wouldn't let me call; said her mother didn't like receiving people in a cottage, after the sort of life she'd been used to."

Arthur smiled.

"Oh, that was all rot," said he simply. "Mrs. Davison is the most fluffy, gentle old lady in the world. It was Rachel who was ashamed of their simple way of living, always Rachel. She twists her mother and sister round her little finger, and she could have had the entire population of London to call if she'd chosen."

Gerard looked hurt.

"She's an odd girl," went on Arthur. "The other day I met her for the first time for months at the Stores. I went there to get some things for mother, and I ran against Rachel. She was beautifully dressed, looked awfully smart, and seemed quite confused at meeting me. She didn't answer when I asked her where she was living, but said her mother was at Brighton and her sister at school in Richmond. And I asked her why she hadn't been to see us, and she said she had meant to come, but had been busy. And she promised to come last Sunday, but she didn't."

"Is she living in town?"

"I don't know; but she's doing well, anyhow. She looked remarkably prosperous. She puzzled me altogether."

Gerard, whose interest in Rachel Davison had been revived and strengthened by this meeting, and these details concerning the girl who had roused his keen admiration, called next Sunday at the Aldingtons, but only to be disappointed and still further puzzled by the accounts he received of Rachel Davison.

For Rose had met her, shopping at Marshall and Snelgrove's, and Rachel, who was exquisitely dressed and accompanied by a well-dressed but undistinguished-looking man had cut her dead.

"She's married, I suppose, and to some sweep whom she doesn't want to introduce to us," suggested Arthur.

And Gerard's spirits ran down to zero at the thought.

CHAPTER II

It was two months later than this meeting, and nearly eight months after his first meeting with Rachel Davison, when Gerard Buckland, as he was "doing" the Academy with a listless air on a hot afternoon in June, came suddenly upon a sight which at once changed his listlessness into excitement of the most violent kind.

In front of him, with half a dozen Provincial and suburban loungers in between, were two girls, both beautifully dressed, of whom Gerard at once recognized the elder to be Rachel Davison.

The transformation, however, from the plainly dressed and dowdy girl he had met a few months ago at the Aldingtons, to the woman in a trained dress of écru lace, with a big brown hat trimmed with long ostrich plumes shading from palest pink to deepest crimson, was so amazing, so complete, that he for a moment doubted whether he had made a mistake.

For the change was not in dress only. The beauty of the brilliant Rachel was of that type which is greatly enhanced by handsome dress, and she appeared ten times more beautiful now than she had done in the shabby clothes of the year before.

The other girl Gerard guessed to be her sister, and a more charming contrast it would have been impossible to find than that of the pale dark beauty and the pink-and-white fair one beside her.

The younger girl was dressed in an ankle-length skirt of black lace, a blouse to match with elbow sleeves, and long black kid gloves to meet them. Her large mushroom hat was black also, and the only relief to the somber hue besides her golden hair and brilliant blonde coloring, consisted in a bunch of sweet peas which was tucked into her dress.

The good looks and smart appearance of the two girls attracted the attention of the crowd in the rooms to such a degree that wherever they went the people followed them, and Gerard had difficulty in forcing his way through the admiring mob to Rachel's side.

The sight of her had confused his thoughts, made his heart beat fast, and revived, with extra vividness, the intense interest he had from the first felt in the girl.

With some diffidence he greeted her, and was relieved to find that she did not "cut" him, but holding out her hand with a smile, while a little tinge of pink color appeared in her cheeks, greeted him by name, thus showing that she had not, as he had feared, quite forgotten him.

"I've been most anxious for the pleasure of meeting you again, and I've asked the Aldingtons about

you, but you haven't been to see them lately, they said," he stammered, although he felt as he spoke that it was rather a stupid thing to say.

She blushed a little more.

"I really haven't much time for visiting now," she said. "Let me introduce you to my sister Lilian, Mr. Buckland. She's at school at Richmond, but I've brought her out for a day's holiday."

"You are living in town now?" he asked.

"Yes, I am staying with some friends. My mother is living down at Brighton, and I divide my time between them," said Miss Davison.

Gerard hesitated. He wanted more than ever to know all about her, to be able to meet her at her home, to renew the acquaintance which had delighted and impressed him so much. But her words seemed to imply quite clearly that she had no such wish on her side.

"I — I had heard — the Aldingtons thought "— he stammered at last —"that you were married."

She smiled.

"I'm not a marrying girl," she said.

There was a pause and then he grew bold.

"You've taken my advice and found an opening for your talents," said he.

Miss Davison looked alarmed.

"What do you mean?" she said quickly.

It was an awkward question to answer. He could not tell her that whereas she had been shabby and

ashamed of being seen in her mother's modest home a few months ago, now she was resplendent in expensive clothes, and evidently as far removed as possible from the pinch of poverty.

"I mean," he said diplomatically, "that from what I saw of you I am sure you would not have failed to find some opening for your energies, and" he dared to add, with a sly glance of admiration, "to judge by what I see, you have succeeded."

The blush faded from Miss Davison's face and gave place to a demure and flickering smile.

"We have had a little luck at last," she said. "That's all. It's nothing to do with me."

At that moment an elderly lady of distinguished appearance, who appeared to be acting as chaperon to the two girls, came up to them from the seat in the middle of the room, where she had been doing her inspection of the pictures — and the people — without fatigue. Miss Davison had to turn to talk to her, but she did not introduce him. So he fell back upon the younger sister, who was full of excitement and happiness over her holiday.

"Don't you find looking at pictures tiring?" asked he, for want of something better to say.

"Oh, no. You see this is a great treat for me, to come out with Rachel; so nothing bores me, as it might anyone who could do this sort of thing whenever he liked."

"You are very fond of your sister, I can see."

The girl's face beamed with affection as she answered —

"I adore Rachel. She's so wonderfully clever and energetic, and good to us. Do you know that she has changed everything for mamma and me, by her cleverness and her hard work?"

"I'm not at all surprised," said Gerard heartily. "I told her when I met her first that I was sure she would find some opening for her talents. She said she had none, but I knew better."

"No talents! Yes, isn't it absurd? That's what she always says," cried Lilian merrily. "A girl who can make eight hundred a year, without any previous teaching or training, simply by drawing designs."

"Indeed!" said Gerard, admiring but almost incredulous at the simplicity of the means.

"Yes," pursued Lilian confidently. "Of course she has to work very hard, and she has to go about just where the firm that employs her wants her to go. But she says she likes it, and certainly they treat her very well."

Gerard was puzzled. That any firm should pay a designer eight hundred a year, and want her to travel about for them seemed strange, he thought. He had had a vague idea that a designer must go through a thorough course of training before his talents were of much practical value; and to learn that a girl who

had had no experience of such work could, within a few months, make such a large income was a surprise to him.

"She must have to work very hard," he said.

"Yes, but she finds time to go about and enjoy herself too. That is the wonderful part of it, and nobody could do it but Rachel," babbled on the pretty childlike seventeen-year-old sister proudly. "Old Lady Jennings, whom she stays with, says she never sees her with a pencil in her hand when she's at home. But she has a little studio somewhere off Regent Street — only she won't tell us where, for fear we should go and disturb her at her work," added the girl ingenuously, "and when she has anything important to do, she just shuts herself up there, and works away for hours. I do wish I were clever like that!" she added wistfully.

"I've no doubt you're clever too, in some other way," almost stammered Gerard, puzzled and confused by the strange account the simple-hearted schoolgirl had given him.

He was conscious, even as he talked to the pretty child, that her sister was watching them with anxiety. Was Rachel anxious that Lilian should not be so frank?

Old Lady Jennings, the distinguished-looking chaperon, seemed to be anxious to have him introduced to her. But Rachel prevented this, and contrived, without any apparance of incivility, to dis-

miss Gerard within a few moments of the conversation he had had with her sister.

He was disturbed, ruffled, rendered uneasy, and vaguely suspicious of he knew not what. But the impression made upon him by Miss Davison the elder, was stronger than ever, and he felt that he could not rest until he had found out more about her, and fathomed the mystery which appeared to surround her.

The more he thought about it, the more certain he felt that the younger sister must be under a misapprehension with regard to the income earned by her sister. Either it was much smaller than she supposed, and Rachel pretended that it was large, in order that the younger might not feel that she was a burden, or else Rachel had some other employment, more remunerative, to eke out her income.

Was she on the stage? Though Gerard knew little about the theatrical profession except from the outside, he was vaguely sure that incomes of eight hundred a year cannot be made there except by actors and actresses who have some training or experience, or who have made such a mark for some special reason or other, that their names must be known to everybody.

That the girl in whom he felt such a strong interest would not stoop to anything unworthy he felt sure. But that he remembered, with an uneasiness which he could not stay, that singular treatment of

her friends the Aldingtons, for whom she had professed so much affection, and yet whom she did not scruple to neglect and even to "cut," without any apparent reason.

And why would she not let him be introduced to old Lady Jennings, when the lady herself had evidently been willing, if not anxious, to know him? Why did such a young woman choose to wrap her doings and her whereabouts in a ridiculous mystery, which could not but be prejudicial both to herself and her young sister?

The whole thing was puzzling, irritating, and Gerard could think of nothing else.

He would have liked to think of Rachel Davison as he had seen her first, and to honor her for her valiant efforts to restore to her mother and sister the luxurious atmosphere of their old home, all by her own hard work.

Now, try as he would to dispel all doubts from his mind, he could not but feel that there was a mystery about her which was disquieting. It was true that this Lady Jennings, with whom she was staying, was a woman with a high and even conspicuous position in the world. Not very rich, she was a great connoisseur and a much sought after hostess, and no girls on the threshold of life could have a better, a shrewder, or a more trustworthy friend.

But, on the other hand, Rachel had not been candid or truthful in her statements to him: was it pos-

sible that she was equally lacking in candor to others?

She had told him that her prosperity was due to "luck," and had expressly stated that it had "nothing to do with her."

Now her sister had said frankly that this "luck" was due to her sister's talents and hard work.

What did this discrepancy mean?

Gerard worried himself unceasingly about this, for he could not get the brilliant and beautiful Miss Davison out of his head. Lilian had said that her sister had a little studio somewhere near Regent Street, where she occupied herself with these wonderful designs which brought her in so handsome an income.

Mrs. Davison, she had said, lived at Brighton, and Rachel divided her time between her mother and Lady Jennings, whose address Gerard immediately set himself to discover.

It was near Sloane Street, a small house, the position of which suggested a rental quite out of proportion to its small size.

Gerard took a walk in that direction, and looked wistfully at the door at which he dared not knock. He felt himself to be growing even dangerously sentimental about this girl, and told himself he was a fool to think of a woman who certainly harbored no thought of him.

And yet — there was the rub! — it had seemed to him, that afternoon at the Academy, that Rachel

looked at him with a certain expression which suggested that, so far from having forgotten him, she retained almost as vivid a remembrance of him as he did of her. This was not a fancy, it was a fact, and it completed his subjugation to the tyranny of his ideal.

He began to haunt the West End, hovering between Sloane Street and Regent Street until one evening, when there was a grand dinner-party given, and a great crowd was assembled in one of the Squares in the expectation of the arrival of royalty, he recognized, with a pang of surprise and terror which almost made him cry out aloud, the face and figure of Rachel Davison not far away from him.

She was dressed in a shabby skirt and blouse, and an old, shapeless black hat, but the disguise was ineffectual for him; he knew her at once, and was about to approach her, and to address her, when suddenly he saw her withdraw to the outskirts of the crowd, followed by a thickset man rather above the middle height. Gerard, hiding himself with a strange sickness at his heart, among the crowd, nevertheless kept watch.

And he saw her hand something bright and glistening to the man, and then disappear absolutely from sight.

Gerard staggered out of the crowd, faint as if he had received a physical wound.

Was Rachel a thief?

CHAPTER III

The incident happened so quickly, the appearance and disappearance from Gerard's sight of the disguised Rachel had been so sudden, so rapid, so quiet, that it seemed as if the whole affair had been a vision, a dream, anything but solid reality.

Was he mistaken about the identity of the girl?

Gerard began to think he must be. After all, it was night-time, there was a great crowd of people about him, pushing and struggling, and it was easy enough, in such circumstances, to mistake an accidental likeness for a strong one.

At least, this was what he told himself, desperately anxious not to be forced to come to the conclusion that the girl he had just seen acting in such a strange, and such a suspicious manner, was the beautiful Rachel Davison who had made so great an impression upon him, whom he could not forget.

Although, however, he was unable to accept his own argument that he might have been mistaken as to the identity of the woman, it was still open to him to invent reasons why he might have been mistaken as to what she was doing. He had believed he saw her hand to a man a glittering ornament which

looked like diamonds. And the impression had brought vividly and painfully to his mind the remembrance of the first occasion of his meeting Rachel, and of her display of nimbleness with her fingers.

There came back to his mind with unpleasant iteration the words she had uttered about her accomplishment being good for nothing; unless she meant to pick pockets.

Of course she had uttered them lightly, and of course he had taken them as a jest. Of course he knew too that the idea of connecting the brilliant Miss Davison with the pursuits of a pickpocket was absurd, revolting, horrible.

He did not even, so he told himself, think the matter worth a second thought. But he went on thinking of nothing else, and hurried away to his rooms in Buckingham Street, oppressed by a sensation of discomfort and depression, such as he could not remember having ever experienced before.

He stopped short suddenly as he was walking quickly along and tried to remember what the man was like to whom he had seen her hand the glittering object.

But the whole episode had passed so swiftly, his own attention had been so completely absorbed in the girl herself and in what she was doing, that he had had no time or attention left for the man. He remembered vaguely that the man's back was turned

to him, that he was tall and broad-shouldered and that he wore a dark overcoat, but he could recall no more details, try as he would.

The man, too, appeared to have been an expert at rapid disappearance, for when Gerard had turned to look for him he was gone.

Supposing that Miss Davison, being a designer and therefore an artist, had been in the habit of disguising herself in order to be able to move about freely, and to see more of the world and of life than she could in her own proper person. Surely there was a possibility of that! There had been instances before of great artists passing themselves off as people of a lower station, in order to gain information. And, now he thought of it, it seemed to him highly probable, and not merely possible, that this high-spirited and clever woman, always active and on the alert for the means to make money for her family as well as for herself, should make a practice of disguising herself in the dress of a poor working girl, in order the more readily to pass without attracting comment among the crowds of London, and perhaps even to collect facts which she could dress up into attractive press articles, or into book shape, with the object of earning a larger income.

The more he considered the matter, the more reasonable this idea seemed. Her sister had said that she was a designer. Was it not more than probable that that was what Rachel called herself, and that her

real occupation was that of a journalist, one of which her old-fashioned mother would probably have disapproved if she had been told of it.

The little story grew in his mind until it seemed the likeliest thing in the world. Rachel, anxious for something to do, aware of her singular cleverness in gliding about without attracting too much attention, had availed herself of the only means at her disposal of earning a good income, by becoming a journalist; and, in order to get the sort of first-hand knowledge of life necessary for her purpose, she habitually went about disguised as a girl of the poorer classes. Because she knew her mother would be distressed if she were to know what profession her daughter followed, Rachel had given out that she was an artist and designer, and so got the time she wanted to herself, and represented herself as having a studio near Regent Street, in order to account for the hours when she was occupied collecting information for the editors who employed her.

The longer he lingered upon this hypothesis, the more he liked it; but in spite of his arguments, there lingered at the bottom of his mind a vague fear that his little story was but a fiction after all.

For what of the glittering thing he had seen her pass to the man?

And what of the man?

Even if his own fanciful theory were correct Gerard did not like the intrusion of a man into the story.

He could not deceive himself about that. There had been a man in the case, apparently young, for he appeared to be as active as herself, and — there had been that glittering thing which he knew, after all, to be a diamond.

What had the professional journalist to do with diamonds? What had she to do with a man?

Gerard resented his own fears, his own doubts, and, determined to solve the mystery at no matter what cost, on the following afternoon he dared to call at Lady Jennings' house, and to ask boldly for Miss Davison.

"Miss Davison is not here at present, sir," said the footman.

"She lives here does she not?" asked Gerard.

"Oh, yes, sir, she lives here for the most part. But she has to spend some time with Mrs. Davison at Brighton. She's been down there for the past three weeks, sir."

Gerard felt as if he had had a blow. For it was on the previous night that he had seen, or believed he saw, Rachel in the crowd, and now he was told that she was at Brighton!

He was about to retire, very dissatisfied, and without knowing what step he should take next to solve the problem which distressed him, when a door opened into the hall and Lady Jennings, whom he remembered, having seen her at Burlington House, came out and asked him to come in.

She was a delightful old lady, with silver-white hair and keen eyes, who dressed perfectly, and who was a little queen in her way.

She was gowned in silver-gray satin with that profusion of rich-toned old lace which every elderly lady who cares for her appearance should never omit from her wardrobe. A knot of lace which yet was not a cap was fastened in her beautiful white hair by two large-headed amber and gold pins, and the rest of the jewelry she wore was old-fashioned, but appropriate and handsome.

She led Gerard into a long room with a dining-table at one end, and every accessory of a boudoir at the other. Among her flowers and her canaries, her fancy-work and her pet dogs she seated herself in a high armchair which seemed specially designed to show off her handsome, erect figure and clever, sympathetic face; and then her dark eyes softened as she turned to her guest and said —

"And so your name is Buckland? Tell me, are you any relation to Sir Joseph Buckland, of the Norfolk branch of the family?"

"I am his grandson," answered Gerard.

"Dear me! How singular! And I danced with him at the ball he gave on the coming of age of his eldest son!"

"My uncle," said Gerard. "He's dead now."

"Dear me! Jo Buckland dead! Then you are the heir to the title, surely!"

"Yes, but not very much more, I'm afraid."

"Well, well, they tell me you're very clever, and that you'll bring back fortune to the old house."

"Who told you that?" asked Gerard, surprised.

"My protegé, Rachel Davison. She heard it from the people at whose house she met you."

"The Aldingtons?"

"Yes, that was the name. She seemed so much interested in you that I've been anxious to know you ever since, especially as I thought you might be related to my old friends. But Rachel is an odd creature. She wouldn't let me speak to you, and I thought perhaps she was jealous of my attractions."

And the old lady laughed delightfully.

"That may well have been," said Gerard, smiling.

Lady Jennings looked at him with keen, dark eyes.

"Rachel's an odd girl," she said. "I've had her living with me for some months now, but I can't say I understand her yet, though I pride myself on having some knowledge of human nature. She's singularly attractive, but eccentric, very eccentric."

"Yes," said Gerard eagerly, "that's just what I've thought. And that makes her more interesting than other girls."

"Yes," said the old lady rather slowly, "I suppose it does. But it's puzzling sometimes."

There was a pause for Gerard did not like to ask direct questions, though he was dying to know in what way Rachel puzzled her clever old friend.

While he was wondering whether he dared put a discreet interrogation about Rachel and her somewhat mysterious accomplishments, Lady Jennings said abruptly —

"Do you believe in the doctrine, belief, theory — whatever you like to call it, that everyone of us in this world has his or her double somewhere or other?"

Gerard, scenting the approach of a confession bearing upon the supposed discovery he had made of Rachel in an odd disguise, hesitated what to reply. The old lady nodded.

"I think you do," she said solemnly. "Well, I never did till lately, when an experience of my own made me begin to think there was something in it."

"What experience was that?" asked Gerard, feeling that he was drawing near to a similar story to his own.

But Lady Jennings did not immediately answer. She raised the gold-rimmed double-eyeglass which she wore dangling in front of her from a long thin gold chain, and looked at a large portrait of Rachel, which stood, framed and draped, on a little table near her.

"A singular face! An unmistakable face!" said she, almost under her breath.

Gerard was alert and eager to hear more, but Lady

Jennings suddenly turned the conversation to another matter —

"And have you had your first brief yet?" she asked.

"Yes, but not many of them," answered Gerard, rather coolly, disappointed at not having heard more of what he wanted to hear.

"And do you ever go down to the old place?"

"To my uncle's? Oh yes, I go down every autumn to shoot, and always at Christmas."

"Ask your uncle whether he remembers Dorothy Bellingham, and tell him, if he does, that she has white hair now, but that she loves Norfolk and the old Hall as much as ever."

"I won't forget."

"And won't you come and see us sometimes?" went on the old lady, with an engaging smile. "I'm always pleased to see my friends, and I should like Sir Joseph's grandson to be my friend. I am always at home from four to six, except on Sundays and in August and the early months of the year. I love to have young people about me. And the young people are an attraction to other young people, aren't they?" she said archly. "More often than not you will find Rachel Davison with me. She's a splendid secretary and does most of my correspondence."

"Your secretary, is she?" asked Gerard eagerly.

"Not actually, but practically," answered Lady Jennings. "I offered to take her as my secretary when she was bemoaning the fact that she could get no work to do, but the girl was too proud. She caught eagerly at the idea of staying with me, and offered to do all my correspondence, but she refused to accept any salary. Then, luckily, she developed this unsuspected talent for design, and before many weeks were over she was able to send money to her mother, to pay for her sister's being sent to a first-rate school, and to dress as she ought to dress. It's astonishingly clever of her, isn't it?"

"Most astonishing," said Gerard emphatically.

Was it fancy? Or did the old lady look at him inquisitively, as if anxious to make out what he really thought?

"And I never see her at work, that is the marvel. It's true she has a little studio where she draws most of her designs, and that she does the rest down at Brighton, when she is staying with her mother. But it's wonderful to me that she can find time for it, when she is always going about with me or with other friends."

"She is at Brighton now, is she not?"

"Yes, she's been down there for the last three weeks."

"May I know her address? I'm going down myself in a day or two, and perhaps I might venture to call?" said Gerard.

Lady Jennings caught at the suggestion, and at once seizing a piece of paper from her writing-table, wrote down on it, with her gold-cased pencil, an address on the sea-front, where she said that Mrs. Davison was now living in rooms.

She seemed quite eager to give him the address, and begged him to call again upon her when he returned to town, and to tell her how Rachel was, and her mother, and when the girl proposed to return to her.

"Tell Rachel," she said, "that she's a naughty girl not to answer my letters, and that I am getting into a dreadful muddle with my own correspondence for want of her help."

Gerard rose, much pleased to have received this general invitation to call when he liked, but went away puzzled and vaguely uneasy.

Lady Jennings, he thought, was quite anxious for him to go to Brighton to see Rachel.

What new surprise would he find in store for him there?

CHAPTER IV

Gerard had made up his mind about the Brighton expedition even while he was talking to Lady Jennings. He was full of conflicting thoughts, hopes, and fears.

On the one hand there was the assurance of a well-known and clever woman of the world like Lady Jennings that Rachel Davison was a charming girl, clever, high-principled, and generous to her family, amazingly industrious and dutiful to her people, but amazingly proud as well.

And on the other hand there was the question of Lady Jennings as to "doubles," which made him ask himself — what he had not dared ask her — whether she had herself fancied she met Rachel Davison in a strange disguise. And there was the old lady's statement that Rachel, while at Brighton, never answered letters, and her evident anxiety for him to go down there and see for himself what the girl was doing.

Of course there was nothing so very amazing in this fact of the disguise, if disguise it was, which he fancied he had seen Rachel wearing. If, as he had supposed possible, she went about as a workgirl to

collect information or knowledge for literary or artistic work, it might well be that she would not tell Lady Jennings all the details of what she did in the way of her professional career.

It seemed, indeed, as far as he could judge, as if this clever, independent young woman were rather a puzzle to her own friends, and as if they treated her with so much respect that they even condescended to allow her to keep her own secrets. But Gerard himself felt that he could not be thus content. Admiring Rachel Davison with an admiration which grew ever more perilous to his peace of mind as the mysterious circumstances connected with her made her more interesting, he felt that the one thing more important than anything else to him at that time was the solution of the mystery about her.

And within a few days he was at Brighton, with the especial object of finding out what he could about Rachel's life while staying with her mother.

It was with a fast-beating heart and an uncomfortable feeling that he had not come in an honest capacity, but in the character of a spy, that Gerard rang the bell of the old-fashioned but substantial lodging-house on the Brighton sea-front, the address of which had been given him by Lady Jennings.

He asked the maid who opened the door whether Miss Davison was at home.

"No, sir, not Miss Davison; but Mrs. Davison is," answered the servant at once.

Gerard decided at once to see Mrs. Davison and to find out something at least about the mother of the girl in whom he was so much interested. He had heard two different accounts of her; the one, from Rachel, implied that she was a woman of some character, deeply suffering from the change she had suffered in circumstances, and the other, from Rose Aldington, which was quite another kind of person.

He was shown into a sitting-room overlooking the parade, and there he found a lady not yet past middle age, with hair scarcely touched with gray, and so like her elder daughter that it was impossible to see the one without being reminded of the other.

Mrs. Davison remembered the name, when Gerard was announced, and welcoming him with an outstretched hand, said —

"Ah, Mr. Buckland, I have heard something about you from both my daughters, and I am very glad to make your acquaintance."

Gerard was surprised and much pleased to hear this, though he wondered in what way he had been mentioned by the girls. Mrs. Davison, who seemed a placid, happy-looking woman, and who had laid down her novel when he came in, and begun to fondle a white Persian cat who resented the attention after the manner of his kind, invited him to take a chair near her, and asked him if he was staying in Brighton.

"Only for a day," said he; "but I was so anxious

to make your acquaintance, knowing your two daughters, as I have the pleasure of doing, that I thought I would venture to call."

"I'm very glad you did," said Mrs. Davison. "To tell you the truth, although I'm so handsomely lodged here, through the cleverness and hard work of my eldest daughter — which I dare say you know all about, Mr. Buckland, I'm rather lonely down here. You see, although Brighton is near London, it is not quite the same thing for one's friends to take a hansom or an omnibus to come and see one, as to take the train."

"Of course not. I wonder you didn't settle in London, since you are so much alone," said Gerard.

Mrs. Davison sighed with resignation.

"It was a fancy of my daughter Rachel's," she explained, "that I should be happier down here by the sea. But I sometimes think, though I haven't liked to say so, that I would rather have had a tiny flat somewhere nearer my friends in town."

She spoke very gently, but it was evident that she suffered more acutely than she liked to own from her isolation.

"But you often have your daughters with you, don't you?" asked Gerard, feeling as he asked the question, uncomfortably like a spy.

"Not so very often," answered the lady in a tone of mild regret. "Lilian is at school, and I don't see her except during the holidays. And Rachel lives

with Lady Jennings, as perhaps you know. I couldn't interfere with that arrangement, because, of course, socially it's such a good thing for my girl to live with a woman who goes about so much as Lady Jennings does. And through Rachel's pride and energy, she is able to earn her own living and so to keep her independence, while Lady Jennings is very grateful for her help and companionship."

"But isn't Miss Rachel staying with you now?" asked Gerard, in a stifled voice, remembering that Lady Jennings had said the girl had been with her mother for the past three weeks.

"Oh no, I haven't seen anything of her for more than a month. She's with Lady Jennings."

Gerard said nothing to this; indeed he felt as if he could not have spoken to save his life. In spite of all the fears and doubts which had previously troubled him concerning Rachel Davison, in spite of what he had seen with his own eyes and heard with his own ears, he had never once supposed her capable of such elaborate and carefully planned deceit as that of which he now found her to be the author.

For what was this story, as it was now unfolded to him? Nothing less than a deliberate lie acted continually and consistently, not only to her mother but to Lady Jennings?

For the past three weeks each of these two ladies had supposed Rachel to be living with the other, and during that time he himself had had what he

now began to think was absolute ocular proof, that she had been living in London disguised as a work-girl all the while.

Of course it was true that the hypothesis that she was engaged in sensational journalism held good still. It might be that Rachel, knowing neither her mother nor Lady Jennings would approve of the way in which she would have to gain actual experience by living among people of a much lower social rank than her own, had devised this method of keeping her experiences a secret from them. But even if this were true, Gerard felt that it was too daring a step for a young woman to take without the support and advice of some older member of her own sex.

And then — the episode of the flashing ornament handed to the man!

He wished that he could do one of two things: either look upon all this that he had heard and seen concerning Rachel and her adventures as the work of imagination, or fact distorted by imagination; or else that he could give up thinking about a girl who, whatever her strength of mind and her brilliancy of intellect, was undoubtedly not entirely to be trusted either in her words or in her conduct.

"Oh yes, of course — with Lady Jennings," he stammered.

Mrs. Davison noticed the absence of mind with which he answered the next questions she put to him; and he, perceiving this and anxious not to be-

tray what he thought or felt, exerted himself to reply and to conceal the effect made upon him by her statement about her daughter.

But then she put a most disconcerting question.

"Do you know Lady Jennings?"

"Yes, slightly."

"You have met Rachel at her house?"

"No, Miss Davison was not there when I called."

"When was that?"

"It was about a week ago."

"Did you see any of her drawings?"

"N-no," answered Gerard nervously, knowing as he did that these same drawings appeared never to have been seen by mortal eye.

"It's most extraordinary," prattled on Mrs. Davison, who was evidently, poor lady, delighted to have someone to break the monotony of the life which her daughter obliged her to lead, "that Rachel should have developed a talent for design, for there has never been any sort of artistic ability in the family, on either side. But I suppose when a girl is very clever, like my Rachel, her talent develops in any direction where it is most wanted."

To this theory Gerard could only make a somewhat vague reply, and Mrs. Davison laughed a little and apologized for talking about nothing but her children.

"But," went on the simple-hearted lady with feeling, "really the way in which my daughter has

changed everything for us by her own strong will and her own exertions, is to me a marvel which shuts out everything else from my mind."

He congratulated her, and had tea with her, and enjoyed the society of the simple old gentle-woman, with a strange undefined hope in his mind all the while that Rachel, the brilliant, the puzzling, the mysterious, would some day develop upon the same lines, if with greater breadth of view and intelligence, as this kindly and feminine personality.

Mrs. Davison let him go with evident regret and begged him to call on Lady Jennings and to give Rachel her love.

Gerard received this tender message with a pang. It seemed to him to argue more mystery, and more undesirable secrecy, about Rachel's mode of life, that her mother should not dare to go up to London to see her elder daughter, but should confide her messages to a chance visitor.

He went back to town uneasier than ever about the girl whom, in spite of all that he had learned, he began to think that he admired more than ever.

He had discovered beyond a doubt that she was capable of elaborate deceit, that she was pursuing some calling of which her relations and friends knew nothing; and yet, while he remembered the incident of the flashing ornament, and the further incident of the unknown man, he felt that he could not give

her up, that he must find her out and know the truth about her.

It was a few days after his visit to Brighton, and while he was debating how soon he might venture to call again upon Lady Jennings, and whether he should find Rachel there if he did, when he saw, one afternoon in Bond Street, a victoria waiting outside a shop. Leaning back in it was a beautifully dressed woman whom he recognized, even before he got near enough to see her face, as Rachel Davison.

She was dressed in écru-colored lace over pale pink, and her sunshade matched her gown. A hat of pale pink with écru-colored outstanding feathers completed an elaborate and handsome toilet.

Gerard was suddenly convinced, as he had not been before, that it was she, and no other, whom he had met, in the shabby frock and battered hat, that night in the crowd. He went up to the side of the carriage and raised his hat, feeling, as he did so, as if the excitement and the suspicions he felt must be discernible in his looks.

It seemed to him that she looked startled on seeing him, and that her manner was rather more reserved and distant than there appeared to be any reason for. He was sure that she had not recognized him that night in the crowd; and the only thing he could think of to account for her coolness was that perhaps her mother had spoken or written to her about his call, and Lady Jennings about his visit to her,

so that the girl had begun to wonder whether he was playing the spy upon her movements.

It seemed to him as he greeted her and she bowed to him, not holding out her hand, that she looked paler than ever. Her natural complexion was colorless, a fact which added, in his eyes, to her exquisite charm and air of extreme refinement. But now he thought it was almost ghastly; and though he told himself that this might be due either to the effect of the pink dress she wore, or to the effect of the season's gayeties and other exertions, he asked himself whether it was not more probably the result of intense nervous strain.

The elaborate deceit of the life she led, whatever her motives might be, must, he thought, be exhausting and depressing even to the most splendid vitality.

"Have you seen anything of the Aldingtons lately?" he asked, by way of something to say which should lead to no awkwardness in replying.

"Nothing whatever. I am so busy that I really haven't time to go and see them, and I don't know what I shall say when I do to excuse myself."

"They will take any excuse, rather than not have the pleasure of seeing you," suggested Gerard. "I'm sure that would be their feeling, as it would be mine."

"Well, I shall be going away in a week or two, and I shan't be able to get to Bayswater before then, I'm quite sure. Besides, I fancy they always go up

the river in the summer, and shut up the London house altogether."

"Have you been in town all the season?" asked Gerard.

And against his will he felt that there was a look in his face, a tone in his voice, which betrayed more than he wished her to know.

She looked startled, as she had done on first meeting him.

"I've had to go down and see my mother, and I've been to Richmond to see my sister," she answered rather shortly. "And you, have you been away yet?"

"Yes, I was at Brighton last week."

"Brighton?" She glanced at him quickly.

"I called upon Mrs. Davison, in the hope of seeing you, Miss Rachel," said he boldly. "I had previously called at Lady Jennings' house —"

"So I heard," cut in Miss Davison with a frown. "I was rather surprised to hear it."

Gerard, determined to go through with the business now that he had made the plunge, summoned all his courage, and said —

"I hope you were not angry with me for calling."

"Why did you do it?" asked Miss Davison sharply.

Once more he gathered together all his courage, and replied more boldly than before, as he came a

step nearer and put his hand on the side of the victoria.

"I did it because I had been tantalized by one meeting with you, and I could not wait patiently till chance put me in the way of another. I therefore called, first on Lady Jennings and then at Mrs. Davison's, in the hope of seeing you."

Miss Davison seemed alarmed, he thought, though she laughed lightly, and affected to be rather amused.

"To look for such a busy, hardworked creature as I am, in any particular spot, is rather a hopeless task," she said. "I have been so overworked lately that I have had to threaten to take a long holiday if I am not allowed a little more relaxation."

He hesitated and then said quickly —

"I suppose it's asking too much to beg you to let me call at your studio and see these designs which have made so great a mark."

She smiled.

"A great deal too much," she said. "I never let anyone see me at my work. Indeed, having to get through it in a totally inadequate time, on account of social engagements I won't and can't give up, I couldn't do it unless I made it a rule that I should be left uninterrupted. Even my own friends are not allowed to visit me in my professional den. I'm an advanced woman, you see, strong-minded, and all that," she added lightly. "The mere feminine

holder of a latch-key is a slave compared to me."

But Gerard, who saw that she kept looking at the draper's shop in front of which the victoria was standing, as if anxious to get rid of him, was not going to take his dismissal until he had paved the way for the explanation which he was by this time determined that she should give him.

"You are waiting for someone?" he asked.

"Yes, for Lady Jennings. This is her carriage, not mine. She is buying something that ought to have been chosen and paid for in five minutes, but she has our sex's proverbial inability to make up its mind."

"Shall I go and look for her, and tell her you're tired of waiting?"

"Oh no, I could scarcely permit that, since I got out of helping her by saying I was tired — as indeed I am — and that I should like the rest out here."

"You do look as if you wanted rest," said Gerard steadily. "I am sure you work too hard. Not only at your social duties, and your designs, but — in other ways."

Miss Davison's pale face flushed suddenly.

"What other ways?" she asked quietly.

"You do a good deal in the way of journalism, I think," he said.

"Do I? How do you know?"

"Do you remember the night of the fête at Lord

Chislehurst's, when the king and queen were expected?"

Miss Davison did not reply in words. But she changed her attitude, and sitting upright, bowed her head as a sign to him to go on.

"There was a tremendous crowd outside, and I saw you there."

She raised her eyebrows incredulously. If she was surprised and disturbed, as he believed, she concealed her feelings perfectly.

"You saw me — outside — in a crowd of that sort?" she said disdainfully.

He nodded with confidence.

"Not dressed as you are now, and not looking as you do now. You were well disguised for your purpose — of journalism — in a hat and coat which would make you laugh if you were to see them on the stage, for instance. I thought the disguise very clever, but I remembered your face too well to be mistaken."

"You were mistaken, though," retorted Miss Davison with a forced laugh.

But he stuck to his guns.

"I think not," he said gently. "I watched you for some time. I — I watched you till — till you gave something to — someone else — a man, and then disappeared."

If he had had doubts before, he had none then. Miss Davison said nothing, but she sat so still, with

such a fixed look of terror and dismay upon her handsome face, that he was smitten to the heart, and felt himself a brute to have tortured her, even though the knowledge of what he had seen could not be kept to himself, and though it was the greatest kindness he could do her to confide it in the first place to her ears.

It seemed quite a long time before she spoke. Then she turned to him sharply, and said in a voice which sounded hard, metallic, unlike her own —

"You have made a most curious, a most unaccountable mistake. You have left me quite dumb. I don't know what to say."

He paused, and then asked in a low voice —

"May I tell what I saw to Lady Jennings?"

"For Heaven's sake — no," cried she hoarsely.

CHAPTER V

There was a long pause when this exclamation escaped the lips of Miss Davison.

She sat back, trembling and silent, staring out before her as if unconscious of the presence of Gerard Buckland, who, holding the side of the victoria with fingers which tightened as he stood, looked into the girl's face with agony which he could not repress. For surely her exclamation was a confession! If she had no connection with the working-girl whom he had seen in the crowd on the night of the fête, why should she mind what he told Lady Jennings? Yet at his suggestion that he should speak to the old lady about what he had seen, Rachel had shown the most helpless terror.

She presently recovered her composure, sat up in the carriage and smiled faintly.

"I don't know," she said, "why I should mind your telling Lady Jennings whatever you please. But it is, perhaps, a little disconcerting to be frankly and candidly disbelieved, and the experience is new and strange to me."

Gerard hesitated what to say.

"All I want to say to her," he said, in a low voice

which he could not keep steady, "is that I think you do rash things, and that you want someone to take care of you, as you are too reckless as to what you do yourself."

Miss Davison looked at him with a frown.

"Do you still persist then," said she, "in believing that it was I you saw that night in the crowd opposite Chislehurst House?"

Gerard met her eyes fairly and frankly.

"I'm quite sure of it," he said simply.

"Most extraordinary!" said she.

He was annoyed with her for persisting in her pretense that he was mistaken.

"And I am sure," he went on stubbornly, "that Lady Jennings has an idea that there is something strange going on."

Miss Davison was prepared for this, evidently.

"I shouldn't like to answer for all the fancies the dear old lady takes into her head," she said. "But I'm sorry that you should think it necessary to encourage her in them."

He could say nothing to this, but drew back, growing very red. Raising his hat, he was about to withdraw without another word, when Miss Davison, suddenly sitting up again, imperiously made an emphatic gesture of command to him to return. Then looking him full in the face she said coldly —

"I object to your trying to make mischief, Mr. Buckland, between Lady Jennings and me."

"I don't want to make mischief, Miss Davison; I want to get your friends to take more care of you."

His tone was so quiet, so stubborn, that she looked frightened again. There was something feminine, helpless about her look and manner when she was threatened, which touched him and made him sorry that he had to seem so harsh. But remembering as he did the reference made by Lady Jennings to the doctrine of "doubles," he was sure that the old lady guessed something, and he knew that, at all costs, he must find out the meaning of what he had seen.

After a short pause, Miss Davison burst into a light laugh.

"My friends, Mr. Buckland, my real friends," she said coolly, "have a strong impression that I don't need looking after, that I can take care of myself."

"Yes, I've no doubt you can take all the care of yourself that a girl can take," said he boldly; "but that is not enough, Miss Davison, if I may dare say so, in the case of a lady as beautiful as you are and as determined to let nothing stand in the way of carrying out her ambitions."

Miss Davison, who had by this time quite recovered her outward serenity, laughed.

"I can't see what ambition would be served by standing about in a London crowd in clothes not one's own," she said. "It sounds to me like the act of a lunatic; but as Lady Jennings considers me

eccentric already, I have no doubt, if you were to choose to put the notion into her head, she would think me quite capable of what you suggest you saw me do. In that case I should simply have to leave her house, where I am very comfortable and very useful to her. For she would certainly worry my life out, and I would not submit to that from anybody."

Gerard bowed, but he did not promise, as she wished him to do, to say nothing to Lady Jennings. There was another short silence.

"I am afraid you will think me a bore, Miss Davison, for obtruding upon you so long," said he, in another attempt to get away.

She detained him instead.

"Are you going to speak to Lady Jennings — and — and my mother?" she asked imperiously.

"If there is nothing in my fancy, what harm is there in my mentioning to both the ladies the extraordinary coincidence?" said he. "It would prepare them, at any rate, for other such coincidences — which will most certainly arise in the future."

And he tried to retreat.

"I can't let you frighten my poor old mother, and worry Lady Jennings to death," she said imperiously. "I must speak to you. I can't here of course; but I must explain."

Explanation was just what he wanted, and Gerard's heart beat high at the word.

"Shall I call —" he began.

She interrupted him by a shake of the head.

"No, no," she said. "How can we talk before her? Let me see." She took out an engagement book from her carriage pocket, and glanced at it reflectively.

"Will you meet me to-morrow somewhere and take me to tea?" she said.

"I shall be delighted."

"I'll get Lady Jennings to lend me the victoria to-morrow, and meet you outside Lyons' tea room at four. Will that do?"

She spoke with the air of an angry empress, cold, reserved, with a suggestion of suppressed thunder in look and voice. Gerard went away in a state of bewilderment impossible to describe.

Not only was he now quite sure that it was she whom he had seen in the crowd, but he knew that she had the strongest possible objection to its being known that she led a double life. He could not understand it. If she had been a clever "sensational" journalist, with subjects to work up by actual observation, as he had at first supposed, there was no reason in the world why she should not have confessed the fact to him. Although he was not an intimate friend of hers, she knew him quite well enough for an ordinary girl to feel sure that he could be trusted with a paltry little secret such as that. It was true that she might naturally prefer

to keep her own counsel to her friends on such a point: old ladies would certainly feel nervous about such an undertaking on the part of a handsome young girl as the passing under a disguise.

But when she was found out, and by a man, surely common sense ought to have suggested to her that confession was the only safe course! If she had told him simply that she wore a disguise in the course of her professional pursuits, and had begged him to keep her little secret, she might have been sure of his delighted acquiescence, and of his satisfaction in the thought that he knew something about her which she wished to keep unknown to the world in general.

Considering the high level of her intelligence, Gerard was greatly surprised and disturbed at her obstinacy.

But he told himself that she would certainly be more open on the following day, and that she would tell him, if not all the truth, at least enough to endeavor to engage his loyalty in keeping her secret.

Yet in spite of these reflections, Gerard felt that there was still something ugly about what he had seen. That passing of the flashing stone to an unknown man, and then the prompt disappearance of the two persons! What was he to think of that? What would she say when he told her, pointblank, as he meant to do, that that was what he saw?

There was all the time underlying his admiration for this beautiful, spirited girl, a sickening horror

of what might be in store for him when he should learn all the truth. It was not, could not be possible that she was a common thief, that the money she earned was made by practices of absolute dishonesty. And yet, the longer he lingered upon the circumstances, the more he thought about that interview with Rachel that afternoon, the more he wondered whether there was something horrible, something dishonorable about the whole affair.

That she was not a designer or artist he was by this time quite sure: every circumstance confirmed him in his opinion. No artist worthy the name can live long without a pencil in his hand; yet no one appeared ever to have seen her at this mysterious work which brought in eight hundred a year!

That notion then he took to be disposed of.

He had suggested to her that she was a journalist, and if she had been one, common sense would have made her confess at once and add that she did not wish the fact generally known.

What then was left? She could not possibly be on the stage without the knowledge and consent of either Lady Jennings or her mother.

What other calling was open to her?

She had herself bewailed the fact that women can do so little, and that so few callings were really open to them.

Yet here was she, admittedly without training in any direction, making what must be a good income.

Gerard tormented himself all that day and the next by these and similar thoughts, all leading in the same unpleasant and unwelcome direction.

The next day when he was waiting outside the tea room in Piccadilly, he was in such a state of morbid excitement and harassed thought, that he wished he had asked her to put off the appointment, to give him time to find out, before seeing her again, what he wanted to know about her mysterious way of life.

He had not to wait very long, for Rachel, being used to business appointments, was punctual. He soon saw Lady Jennings' victoria driving up, and saw that Rachel herself, very quietly but well dressed in striped black and white silk, with black hat, black gloves, and a black and white sunshade, was the sole occupant.

He helped her out of the carriage and saw that she looked rather flushed, a fact which added to her beauty, and then he led her into the tea room.

They were early, so they had their choice of a table, and seated themselves near enough to the little orchestra for the music to help to cover their conversation, which they knew was going to be serious.

It was some time, however, before Gerard dared to broach the subject upon which Miss Davison had promised to enlighten him.

He could not very well say, "And now for an explanation!" but had to wait her good pleasure.

Miss Davison, however, seemed to have forgotten the reason of their meeting. She chatted gaily, ate buttered scones hungrily, saying that she had been too hard at work to have any luncheon, and enjoyed herself in looking about her, which she did with a certain keenness which was not at all like the casual glance of the ordinary girl out to tea.

It was not until they had nearly finished tea, and when there was a short silence, that Gerard dared to say —

"I have been thinking all night about our meeting yesterday, and about what you said to me."

He was nervous, agitated. Miss Davison clasped her hands, and turned to him superbly —

"And what was that?" she asked.

But he would not be silenced like that. Gathering all his courage, he said —

"You know you promised me an explanation of — of what I told you I saw — that night — in front of Lord Chislehurst's — in the crowd."

"And what was that? Tell me exactly what you did see," said she imperiously.

And if she was disturbed she hid the fact very thoroughly indeed.

He hesitated, and then said steadily —

"I saw you — in a poor sort of dress, with a large, flopping black hat bent out of shape and with a feather out of curl that hung over it and shaded the eyes, standing alone — or you seemed to be alone,

in the crowd. Then I saw you hand something that flashed — I think," he added, bending forward to speak low and hurriedly, "it was diamonds or a diamond — to a man, who took it from you. And then you disappeared, and so did he, so completely that I did not see a trace of either of you again."

Miss Davison listened with an unmoved face.

"And what," she said, when he had finished, as she put her elbows on the table, still with her hands laced together, and looked at him with a sort of scornful challenge, "did you think of that?"

Once more he hesitated. Then he said —

"I did not know what to think, Miss Davison."

She smiled with the same superb scorn.

"Did you," she asked majestically, as she looked at him through her eyelashes with an air of ineffable contempt, "think I was a thief?"

The blood rushed to his cheeks.

"How can you ask me such a question?" he stammered.

"But," persisted she, "I don't know what else you can mean, if you really saw what you say you did, and if you put upon it the construction which anybody else would put."

"You said," he murmured, in a hoarse whisper, "that you would explain."

"Well," said she, "what do you want me to say? Do you want me to assure you that I am not a thief?"

"Of course not."

"Do you want me to say that it was not I you saw?"

He drew a long breath.

"You can't say that," he retorted passionately.

"Oh yes, I can, and I do," said Rachel slowly. "Forgive me, Mr. Buckland, if I've seemed to take this too lightly, but the truth is that the whole affair is a desperately serious one for me. That girl has roused suspicions in more people than one, and will again, I'm afraid."

"What girl?"

"The one you saw — my 'double' — Maud Smith, as she calls herself, a well-known thief."

Gerard sat back and looked at her incredulously. Then he bent forward again, and looking earnestly, entreatingly into her face, asked —

"Do you mean to tell me that the girl I saw that night was not you?"

"I can answer for that," she said. "What should I be doing in a crowd at that time of night — and picking pockets?"

"Oh, I didn't say that!"

"Didn't you? I think you implied it, though. You saw this girl pass jewelry to another person. And then you saw no more of them. Is any other explanation possible than that they were a couple of thieves?"

It seemed to him callous, horrible, for her to put

his unspoken dread into simple, straightforward speech. He shrank before her as she did so.

"I — I thought perhaps I was mistaken, and that —"

"But you were not," she interrupted sharply. "It is the bane of my life, that this girl, who is, I am sorry to say, a relation of mine —"

"A relation?"

"A near relation," she repeated solemnly. "I say it is the greatest trial I have to put up with that she should go about as she does, and lead the dishonest career she does, and that the likeness between us should be so strong that not you only, but two or three more of my friends have seen her and have thought — what you thought," she added quickly.

He tried to look as if he believed her, but failed.

"And you say her name is Maud Smith?"

"No, I said she called herself so. Her real name, unfortunately, is much more like mine. So far she has escaped detection and conviction, though often only by the skin of her teeth. Until she is taken up and convicted I suppose I shall be exposed constantly to the same annoyance of having her mistaken for me."

"But won't it be a great scandal for the family?"

"Not necessarily. Her real name might not come out. But even if it did, I think it would be better than for me to suffer the constant misery of being mistaken myself for a pickpocket, and by people who

ought to know me better," she ended with a flash of anger.

Gerard hung his head, but he could not feel very guilty.

"The resemblance is indeed extraordinary," he murmured.

She shook her head with a bitter little laugh.

"I see you don't believe it is only a resemblance," she said. "Then pray what do you think about it? At least I know. You must believe that I pick pockets for a livelihood."

"Miss Davison!"

"Well, what other explanation is possible?"

He sat back again, pained and uneasy.

"I wish," he burst out suddenly, "that you would let me see you and this girl — side by side."

She smiled contemptuously.

"I see you don't believe what I've told you," she said.

"Frankly, I can't."

"You can't believe that a face seen for a few moments — in a crowd — in the darkness — surmounted by an old tawdry hat with a bedraggled feather — was any other than mine?"

Gerard replied stoutly —

"Well, no I can't. I could believe myself mistaken with regard to any other person's face. I could think I had let my imagination play tricks with me; but not with your face."

"Why not with mine?"

Their heads were close together, the music was playing, and there was nobody near enough to hear. So he blurted out the words which he had that morning thought it impossible that he should ever say to this woman who charmed him, but tantalized him at the same time.

"Because I love you."

"You love a pickpocket?"

"No, no, no."

"But it's the same thing, isn't it?"

"No. I don't believe your explanation; I can't. But I don't believe either that you could be guilty of anything that was not absolutely honorable and right. I'd rather believe that my own senses had betrayed me than believe one word of anything but good about you."

When he had once begun Gerard found himself fluent enough. He would rather have expected, if he had left himself time to expect anything, that Miss Davison would have affected to scoff at his abrupt confession, and would have laughed at him and as it were brushed him from her path with scorn, putting on airs of indignation that he should dare to make a sort of accusation against her in one breath, and a declaration of love to her the next.

But she did nothing of the sort. On the contrary, he saw her face change, the muscles tremble, the head bend, and a tear glitter in her eye.

"Thank you," she said, in a hoarse whisper. "I — I — we'd better go now, I think. Lady — Lady Jennings —"

She did not finish her sentence, but rose from her chair, put out a trembling hand for her sunshade, and began to walk up the long room.

When they were outside, Gerard, who was surprised and infinitely distressed at the unexpected effect of his words upon her, said humbly —

"Are you very angry with me?"

"Yes," said Miss Davison.

But her tone belied her words: it was gentle, soft, womanly, almost tender.

He grew bolder.

"Not very angry, I think?" he suggested, as they stood in the gathering crowd on the curbstone, neither quite sure what they were going to do next.

"Yes, I'm very angry," said she. "You've accused me of disgraceful things, and then you've dared —"

"Well, what have I dared?" ventured he, seeing that the anger she talked about was of the kind that usually melts on being challenged.

"Oh, don't let us talk nonsense," said Miss Davison.

"Is the carriage to meet you here? Or may I take you —"

"Where to?"

"Anywhere you want to go to."

"I sent the victoria away," she said, "to meet Lady Jennings, and I don't suppose it will come back for me."

"Let me take you to see pictures, or something. Do."

Something in her manner, in her tone, had suddenly made him forget everything in the consciousness that she was not so indifferent as she pretended. He felt that the explanation she had promised him having turned out so unsatisfactorily, he had a right to a better one, and he thought that, if she would only be coaxed into spending a little more time in his society, he should get it.

She hesitated. Then she looked at her watch.

"It's five o'clock," she said. "We might fill up the time somehow till seven, when I have to be home to get ready for dinner."

Gerard hailed a hansom, and helped her in.

"Where are we going to?" asked she.

"To the park," said he. "The part where the people aren't, and where we can talk."

Bold as the speech was, he had been confident that it would meet with no challenge.

And it did not.

CHAPTER VI

The hansom went quickly through the streets, and took them, as Gerard had said, to that quiet northern end of the park where scarcely a breath of the world's life is ever drawn.

They got out and wandered into the little-frequented paths, by this time destitute even of the children and nursemaids whom they would have found at an earlier hour.

Both the young people felt that they were enjoying a sort of surreptitious picnic, an unconventional, ridiculous *tête-à-tête* which was all the more pleasant and all the more exciting from the fact that they stood each on the defensive towards the other: Rachel still affecting a haughty indignation at his suspicions; Gerard humble but unconvinced of the truth of her story.

"Well," she said, breaking the silence, "you told me you were going to bring me here to talk. What are we to talk about?"

"I don't care. Talk about anything, as long as I can hear you speak."

"But you don't believe what I say!"

He hesitated.

"What does that matter?" he asked at last.

She stopped short and faced him, but there was no longer any pretense at fierceness in her tone. She was argumentative, and she was charming.

"I don't like to be disbelieved," she said; "and I'm not used to it. I resent it, indeed; for you can't respect a person whom you don't believe."

"Oh yes, you can. I don't quite believe something you told me half an hour ago, but I respect and admire you more than any woman I ever met."

"But that's inconsistent!"

"Very likely."

"You can't really respect a woman whom you believe to be incapable of speaking the truth."

"Of course one couldn't. But I don't think anything of the kind about you. I think that you have told me what is not true, but I take it that you had your own reasons for doing so, and you are in no way bound to tell me anything but what you please."

Miss Davison seemed surprised and touched by these words, and said —

"I suppose you think that is very magnanimous."

"No; very silly. If it were any other woman but you, Miss Davison, I shouldn't be such a fool."

"Your compliments are rather left-handed; don't you think so?"

"They are not meant to be compliments at all. I tell you quite plainly, without any compliment, that I admire you more than any woman I have ever met,

and that I am ready to accept from you conduct which I should think dangerous and absurd in anybody else."

"How is my conduct dangerous and absurd? Do you mean in coming here with you?"

"No," said he, smiling. "I mean I think it is dangerous to go about disguised only just enough to be recognized easily by people who know you. And absurd not to confess your little secret at once to me, who, as you must see for yourself, am much too far gone to be capable of anything but the most extravagant rapture at being trusted by you."

He had done with reserve now, and he told her steadily and straightforwardly his story, in tones which left no doubt as to the genuineness of his feeling.

"You are right," she said softly, after a pause, "to call yourself silly."

"Well, won't you take pity on my feeble intellect and tell me — something more?"

She shook her head.

"I've told you," she said stubbornly, "all there is to tell. If you've inveigled me here in the hope of getting anything more out of me than I've told you, you have miscalculated, and you have wasted your time."

"No, I haven't," he said softly. "I'm enjoying myself very much. I can talk to you, I can look at you, and I — can ask you things."

She did not ask him what things, but became quiet and subdued, and occupied with the landscape. He was seeing her in new circumstances, in a new light, and the change from talkativeness and brilliancy to a singular tranquillity interested and delighted him.

"And you can disbelieve the answers," she said softly.

"I don't know. It doesn't follow, as I've told you, that because I don't quite understand one answer you've given me that I might never understand you."

"I said believe, not understand."

"Same thing. If I were to ask you whether you'd ever cared for anybody, I might perhaps believe your answer, if you would give me one?" he suggested diffidently.

"Well, I haven't. I haven't had time to think about that sort of thing," said Miss Davison, in a matter-of-fact tone.

"Really? Never?"

"Word of honor. Of course you can't say that. Or, if you did, I shouldn't believe *you*."

"Why should I be disbelieved more than you on such a point?"

"Because it's one, I think, upon which no man tells the truth to a woman."

"Don't you think you will ever care for anybody?"

She hesitated, and once again that pretty, faint tinge of pink color came into her cheeks.

"I don't say," she answered, in a dreamy and gentle tone, "that it might not be possible. But it would make no difference. I have laid down a plan of life, and I mean to keep to it. The sort of sentiment you mean has no place in it."

"But why not? Isn't there any pleasure in — the sort of sentiment I mean?"

"Oh, yes, I dare say there is. In fact," and a faint smile appeared on her face, one of those charming smiles that flitted over her face from time to time so lightly that they illuminated the eyes rather than stretched the muscles of the mouth, "I may say I'm sure of it."

"Then why be so stoical?"

"Well, because, for one thing, I'm convinced that the better I'm known the less I'm likely to be loved —"

"That I deny!"

She turned upon him with pretty scorn.

"What matters your denial?" she said. "I *know!*"

"You don't know what love is — I must say the word," said he with passion. "I've tried to call it everything else, but the real name must come. I love you, Rachel, I've told you so, and the more I know you the more I love you."

"Yes, because I take care you shan't know me beyond a certain point; and I never mean to. No. Let me have my say now," she went on, as he tried to interrupt her. "I'm not a bit ungrateful for your

feeling: I don't pretend not to be pleased. I am pleased. I like you, and if I were a different sort of woman I should find it easy enough to go farther; but I don't mean to. No, no, no;" and with every repetition of the word her voice grew firmer. "Just listen to me, Mr. Buckland," and she looked steadily into his face. "If you were to know more, if I were to tell you all the truth about myself, I'm satisfied that you would never feel a spark of anything like sentiment — the sort of sentiment we mean — again. No, look incredulous if you like; be incredulous if you like. In fact, I'd rather you should be incredulous about it; but it's the plain truth all the same. Although we had a little wrangle this afternoon about something you fancied you saw, and that I explained in a way you didn't like, it is absolutely true that there is something to be known about me which would make an insurmountable barrier between us. Now don't think me hard and unfeeling: I'm neither the one nor the other really. But I am other things that the ideal should not be, and one of those things I'll confess to you. I'm proud: not rightly proud, but wrongly proud. And that alone is enough to stand up and divide us — forever."

Even as she spoke, and as it were instinctively, she held out her hand, stretching it to its utmost distance from her, as if she were warding him off. Something in her face, her voice, her manner, made the gesture so

significant that Gerard felt as if he had received a blow.

"And now good-bye," said she; "and I thank you for having suggested this walk — and this talk. I am glad we have had the opportunity of speaking out frankly. Now, in the future, all will be plain."

He would have burst out into an eloquent appeal to her to be open with him, to tell him what was troubling her, to take into her whole confidence the man who loved her, who was ready to give his life for her; but Miss Davison, with her usual cleverness, had seen and taken advantage of the approach of a group of people, foreigners on their way to the Albert Memorial, to make an effectual barrier against a continuation of their talk.

She insisted on going with the stream of people, and he had to follow her, bewildered, distressed, and silent, until they turned into the high road, when she made him put her into another hansom, and shaking hands with him, drove away in the direction of Sloane Street, with a wholly conventional farewell.

Gerard went home to his rooms, puzzled, distressed, and perplexed as he had never been before.

Not a bit nearer the solution of the mystery which surrounded Miss Davison than he had been before.

There was the puzzle, that she could talk to him, could be frank with him — up to a certain point, but that she could keep her own counsel perfectly, almost

uncannily, and as it were hold him off while certainly at the same time keeping him on.

For, mystery or no mystery, he was now more in love with her than ever.

He made an attempt to see her, by calling at Lady Jennings' house, but he saw only the old lady, and heard that the young one was out.

He haunted the streets looking for a glimpse of her, but for some time in vain.

But as in London no one can remain untraced for long, and as Miss Davison, in her own proper person, was not the sort of woman to remain long unseen, in the very last days of July he caught sight of her as she got out of Lady Jennings' victoria at the door of one of the big stores.

She was, he thought, more exquisitely dressed than ever, in the palest blue batiste — of course he did not know that it was batiste, he simply called it "bluey stuff"— with a big hat and belt of deepest sapphire color. She wore a row of pearls round her neck, a watch studded with pearls and diamonds on her breast, and in her hat were pins set with real stones.

He thought she looked the daintiest fairy princess he had ever seen; and the long cloak which she carried over her arm, of silk of the sapphire shade lined with the pale blue, was a garment which even ignorant male eyes could admire.

He followed her into the stores, but kept at a good

distance, wondering whether she would condescend to see him, and whether he should get snubbed.

She was buying largely, in one of the most crowded compartments of the establishment, where real lace handkerchiefs and dainty and expensive trifles made of lace were being disposed of at "sale prices" which scarcely seemed so "alarming" as they were described to be.

At last she caught Gerard's eye, and he saw her falter and turn pale as she handled, with a connoisseur's fingers, a beautiful shawl of modern point lace.

He wondered whether she was going to cut him; but she did not. She was evidently confused at the sight of him, but she recovered herself, shook hands, and then, asking him to get her a packet of post-cards, and to meet her outside with them, dismissed him on what he saw to be an errand invented to get rid of him.

He was disturbed, perplexed, but that was no new experience where Miss Davison was concerned. He went obediently to do her bidding, hoping for a few minutes' talk to compensate him for his docility.

But as he went back towards the department where he had left her, he met one of the employés hurrying out, saying excitedly under his breath to another —

"Tell the commissionaire to go for a policeman. We've got hold of our swell shop-lifter at last."

CHAPTER VII

Gerard felt sick with alarm. A shop-lifter! Although he was ashamed of his own fears, they overpowered him.

He asked himself what right he had to connect the arrest of a well-known shop-lifter with the presence of Miss Davison in that particular department of the stores where the theft appeared to have been detected. But even as he did so, and tried to think that he ought to be ashamed of his suspicions, he knew very well that they were justified; that the episode of the sparkling ornament passed by Miss Davison (or her "double") to the man in the crowd on the night of the fête at Lord Chislehurst's suggested inevitably that she was the person who was now to be arrested for theft.

The thought was horrible. Even though, in this first moment of surprise and dismay, he had no doubts about her guilt, he was none the less as much distressed to think of the disgrace which awaited her as if she had been one of his own kin.

For the puzzle, the marvel of the situation was that although he could not help his strong suspicions of Miss Davison's honesty, he knew her to be as pure-souled as it is possible for a human being to be, and

the conviction which had already been forming in his mind now grew stronger that she must be a kleptomaniac, and that she stole, if indeed she did steal, not from criminal intention, but by irresistible instinct.

Of course this supposition did not account for everything. There were discrepancies in any story which he could make up to account for the strange behavior, the glaring inconsistencies of the beautiful girl who had roused his admiration and inspired him with an unconquerable passion.

She seemed far too sane and well-balanced a girl to be subject to mania of any kind, and it seemed to him extraordinary, if she were really a prey to a disease so acute and so distressing, that she had not been put under some sort of restraint, or at least that she was not constantly shadowed by some companion who could explain her idiosyncrasy and pay for the things she stole.

He had heard of such things being done in well-known cases of this kind, and he felt sure that she could not have become so expert as she evidently was without the fact of her tendencies becoming known to some, at least, of her friends.

But even while he argued thus with himself, hoping against hope that he could prove to himself that she was innocent of criminal intent, one circumstance after another obtruded itself upon his mind, all tending to confirm the fact that she was too artful, too de-

liberate in her plans, for an innocent victim of instinct.

The sending of her mother to Brighton, for instance, and the cleverness with which she played off Mrs. Davison and Lady Jennings, the one against the other, pretending to the one that she was staying with the other, when all the while she was absent on some mysterious and unexplained "business," spoke, not of innocence, but of a very well developed and keen instinct for deceit of the most flagrant kind.

And, if her thefts were the result of kleptomania, where did her income come from? For her appropriation of other people's property to be blameless it must be proved that she did not profit by it. Whereas he knew that, without any occupation that could be traced to her, she made large sums of money!

And she had told him frankly that her character was not a lovable one, that there was a barrier between them which could never be passed.

Strange to say, however, it was upon these words of hers and the manner and tone in which she said them, that Gerard relied more than anything else for his own fixed and firm belief in her real innocence.

She was conscious that there was something in her character and conduct that would be disapproved of, and that would make an insurmountable obstacle between her and him. And yet she said this with an evident belief that she herself was justified in the course she held. And she was so grave, so sincere,

so entirely sane in manner and look during their talk, that Gerard had felt convinced that the barrier of which she spoke was not one of the terrible character her actions would have led him to suppose.

And now — what was he to think?

The moment he heard the order given by one of the shop-walkers to a subordinate, to run for a policeman, he determined to wait outside to see what was going to happen.

He did not know what was the customary procedure on such occasions, but he imagined that a cab would be called, and that a small party, consisting of the accused person herself, one or more of the shop-assistants, and a policeman, would come out by one of the side-entrances, get in and drive off as quietly as possible to the nearest police-station, where the charge would be preferred.

He thought that perhaps, in such a case, he might be able to be of use, as he could offer to fetch her friends, and bring the necessary and usual testimony to her respectability.

In the meantime, however, he addressed himself to another assistant, who had overheard the order given to fetch the police, and asked him if such occurrences were common there.

The man seemed reluctant to speak, but said that they were very rare.

"I believe, however, sir," he added, "that this is a bad case, and that we have at last succeeded in

catching a woman who has been doing this sort of thing systematically in the big London stores for a considerable time past. She dresses splendidly, and is altogether what we should call a very smart person, and nobody would suspect her of being a thief."

Gerard wondered whether he should press forward and present himself as a friend of the unhappy woman. But he reflected that this was impossible until he was absolutely, instead of morally, sure of her identity, and he had to content himself with his previously proposed course of conduct.

Before he could carry out his intention, however, he saw the assistant come back with a policeman; and both men, amidst the whispers and questions of such of the customers as noticed the occurrence, passed hurriedly through one department after another, and disappeared into a private room into which all the rest of the persons interested in the affair had retired.

There was great excitement everywhere, which the assistants in vain tried to allay by assuring the customers that nothing of any consequence had taken place.

And in the midst of the excitement, a tall, thin man, tightly buttoned up in a frock-coat, and wearing a pair of gold-rimmed spectacles, came quickly into the stores, and was led into the locked private room where the shop-lifter had been temporarily imprisoned.

Gerard looked at him, noted his black beard, his silk hat, his professional manner, and wondered

whether he was a doctor called in to pronounce as to the sanity of the thief.

Then, with a heavy heart, after watching the door of the private room for a few minutes, the young man went out into the street. There for a couple of hours he wandered up and down, without seeing anyone come out who appeared to have any connection with the unhappy incident of the afternoon.

He made the circuit of the building, going round to the back entrances, where nothing unusual appeared to have disturbed the peace of the neighborhood. He feared that the party might have gone to the police-station long since, escaping quietly by some little-known door in order to avoid attention.

At last the hour for closing the stores arrived, and the last customer having left, Gerard watched the doors more keenly than ever, thinking that perhaps they would have decided not to leave the building until the customers had left.

Just as the shutters were closing, he saw a lady step out quickly and make a dash for the four-wheeled cab that was waiting outside.

Gerard uttered a low cry of surprise and relief.

It was Rachel, and she was alone. He stepped forward quickly, and saw that she was allowed to come out by herself, and that there was no one in the cab, the door of which the commissionaire was holding open.

"Miss Davison!" cried Gerard, with an air of

triumph, which made her stop short, startled, and turn quickly to look at him. For a moment she stood as if not knowing what she was doing, or at whom she was looking, and he saw that she was not pale with the healthy pallor of every day, which he had so often admired, but with a ghastly whiteness that looked sickly and distressing.

"Oh," she said faintly, "is it you, Mr. Buckland! Why — surely" — she uttered the words slowly, pausing between them, as if collecting thoughts that had gone very far away, and slowly coming back to the life of every day again — "surely — you — have not — been waiting for me all this time!"

She looked scared, and stared into his face as if she would have penetrated to his inmost thoughts.

"I — I didn't know what had become of you," he stammered hoarsely. "I — I thought you meant to meet me outside."

She started.

"So I did. I remember!" said she. And then, very sweetly, as if overcome with remorse, she said, "I'm so very, very sorry; but I forgot all about it. I have spent the whole afternoon, or at least nearly three hours of it, buying lace and frocks and things, and trying hats on! I'm so awfully ashamed of myself. Do please forgive me."

"Let me send away this cab, and take you to tea

somewhere. You look done up," said Gerard, still speaking as if he hardly knew what he was about.

She hesitated and looked around her stealthily.

Then she said shortly, in a faint voice —

"All right."

Gerard gave the cabman a shilling, and hailing a hansom, helped her in and told the man to drive to the nearest tea-shop.

Then he jumped in after her, feeling his heart sink.

For the delight and relief of the first moment, when he had been ready to look upon her appearance by herself, a free woman, as a sign that she was innocent and that he had misjudged her, had given place to a dread that the danger was not over yet, and that she knew more about the affair of the shop-lifting than for the moment he had supposed.

They went along in silence, Rachel closing her eyes as if too tired to talk, and Gerard dumb with fear and distress, and a kind of desperate pity.

It was quite plain that she had been through a harassing time, much more distressing and fatiguing than an afternoon spent in trying on new clothes could possibly have been. So he left her in peace until they got out at the tea-shop, and even then he waited until she was refreshed, and until her natural pallor had returned to her cheek instead of the unhealthy flush which had succeeded to the ghastly whiteness he had at first noticed on meeting her.

Then it was she who, noting his eyes fixed upon her face with stealthy interest, asked him abruptly —

"Why did you wait for me?"

He hesitated.

"I didn't know how long you would be. I — I was not sure where you were," he began. Then changing his mind he said suddenly, "And something had happened at the stores to interest me — the shop-lifting."

She looked at him steadily.

"What was that?" she asked.

But he lost his patience, and said curtly —

"Oh you must know. Why pretend you don't?"

But Miss Davison had entirely recovered her self-possession by this time, and she leaned back in her chair, played with the glove she had taken off, and said —

"Was that what all the fuss was about? The crowd and the crush round a private door at the back?"

"Yes," said he shortly.

"Tell me all about it," said she.

And suddenly leaning forward, she looked at him with an expression in which interest in his narrative was combined with perfect innocence as to the details to be related.

Gerard did not know whether to be amazed, disgusted, or amused. This brazen attitude might either be considered shocking, perplexing, or simply whimsical, as one chose to look at it. He looked down,

and when he raised his head again, after being lost in thought for a few moments, he fancied he surprised upon Miss Davison's beautiful face a sort of wistful look, as if she was sorry and ashamed of the attitude she had to take up, or at least that was the fancy that came into his head about it.

He dashed into his narrative abruptly when their eyes met.

"A woman was caught in the act of stealing something, I believe," he said, keeping his eyes fixed upon her, but meeting with no shrinking in return; "and I learn that she is an old offender. A smartly dressed woman who goes about to the best shops, and is well known, but whom, as I gathered, they've not been able to catch before."

"And have they caught her now?" asked Miss Davison innocently. He stammered and grew red.

"They — they seemed to think so," he said, in a voice that was not steady.

"Did you see her?"

"If I did it was without knowing that she was a shop-lifter," said he.

"Kleptomaniac, they call that sort of woman nowadays," observed Miss Davison lightly. "She will get off, depend upon it. Some old doctor will swear to her being in ill health and not responsible for her actions. Oh, that's what they always say."

Gerard remembered the man with the black beard and the gold-rimmed spectacles, and sat back re-

flectively. Was Miss Davison merely relating what had already happened? Had she waited calmly while they went for a doctor, and had he then examined her and at once pronounced her as wanting in balance and not responsible for her actions?

It seemed like it.

"But they say she has done it before!"

"And got off before in the same way, no doubt," said Miss Davison quietly. "Watch the papers for the next few days, and you will find nothing about the case, I'll answer for it."

"Did they tell you so at the stores?" asked he dryly, and with emphasis which he did not try to hide.

"I know by what I have seen before of these cases," she replied evasively. "It doesn't do any good to the shops to have these things known, because there's always some sort of doubt thrown upon the case by the other side and people are led to believe that there's been undue harshness in pressing the charge."

Gerard listened in confusion. Had she reckoned upon these things, and so felt sure that she would escape the disgrace of arrest, trial, and conviction?

"Are they unduly harsh in this case?" he asked.

"How should I know? These people keep affairs like that quiet, and a casual customer like myself hears nothing about it except by chance, unless it gets into the papers, which, as I tell you, it very seldom does. London is full of well-dressed thieves, and a good many of them steal for pleasure, and hoard what they

steal. When they get found out, the usual way of dealing with them is to make them pay for what they have robbed the tradesman of, as they can always do easily enough. I'm quite sure nobody knows how much of that sort of thing goes on. It's very rarely you find such a case in the papers, very common to meet with them outside."

She spoke simply, as if upon a matter with which she had nothing to do, but on which she was able to supply information, and did so because he appeared interested in it.

"And what degree of guilt do you ascribe to them?" he asked abruptly. "Are they conscious of what they are doing, and aware that they are committing crime?"

A faint smile flickered over Miss Davison's face.

"Some of them," she answered rather dryly, "are very well aware of it, indeed."

There was an awkward pause. Presently he caught a strange glance from Miss Davison; she suddenly looked at him in a frightened way, as if she thought her last words had contained a confession, and was anxious to qualify them. But before she could speak, he said —

"What makes them do these things then? What makes an honorable woman who is not in want, stoop to such meanness, such despicable dishonesty?"

He spoke with great warmth, his eyes flashing, his fists clenched. He was torn with conflicting feelings,

perplexity, horror, pity, contempt, and through it all he wondered whether it could be true, and whether this lovely woman with the frank face, the straightforward manner, the noble aims, the steadfast heart, could really be guilty of the abominable crime of theft.

She hesitated and looked down. In her face there was a strange expression which he could not understand. It might be shame alone, or sullen anger, or fear, or a compound of all three. All he could be sure of was that it was infinitely painful for him to watch her, and to know that it was his words which were inflicting upon her a torture which, whether deserved or not, was none the less distressing for him to cause.

For he loved her; in spite of the fears, doubts, certainties even, which tormented him concerning her, he was ready to believe impossibilities, to trust her honesty and truth in spite of everything, to say to himself that there was no trace of the criminal in her; and that, if indeed these larcenies could be brought home to her, as he prayed that they could not be, then that they were the result of some overpowering impulse of which she was ashamed, and which the doctor who was called in by the people at the stores, had been able to explain and account for.

After a silence which appeared long to both, Miss Davison raised her head to reply to his questions. But as she began to speak, her eyes were evidently attracted by some object behind him, and he perceived,

as she uttered some commonplace words, instead of saying what he was anxious to hear that she was intent upon something else and was no longer giving him her attention.

He saw, indeed, a slight raising of her eyebrows, which he took to be a sign to some person behind him. Turning quickly, Gerard was just in time to see a well-dressed man behind him, in the place to which her eyes had been directed.

The man's back was turned. Gerard watched him in the hope that he would turn round and show his face; but instead of doing so, the man went straight out of the shop and disappeared in the crowd outside.

When Gerard turned around again, Miss Davison was on her feet.

"I don't know what poor Lady Jennings will say," she cried, "at my being late for dinner, as I can't help being. I must make all the haste I can."

"I'll get you a cab," said Gerard rather coldly.

He was, in spite of himself, roused to fresh suspicion by this apparent collusion between Rachel and the man who had gone out of the shop. He went out with her, put her into a passing cab, and, by her direction, gave the driver Lady Jennings' address. There was some reassurance in this, that she was going back home, and he tried to find comfort in the fact, saying to himself that if she had been in any fear of being followed or arrested, she would not have done this.

When she had driven away, he was about to continue his own journey back to his rooms, when a girl ran out of the tea-shop with a cloak which he recognized as the handsome one he had admired on Rachel's arm.

"The lady left this, sir," said the girl.

He took it with inward satisfaction, for it afforded him exactly the excuse he wanted for going to Lady Jennings' house, to find out whether Rachel had really returned there, as she had apparently proposed to do.

He was half ashamed of himself for his mistrust, well founded as it was, as he got into a hansom and drove away.

CHAPTER VIII

Gerard arrived at Lady Jennings' house at an awkward hour, and felt rather diffident as to the sort of message he should give, as he knew it would be dinner-time, so that he could not very well ask to see Rachel, and yet did not like to ask if she were at home and then give the cloak.

When he got to the house, however, he saw that there was no light in the dining-room, the window of which was wide open, but that a lady was sitting in the room above, which he knew must be the drawing-room. There was a light in the room, but the lady was standing between the curtains, looking out.

Puzzled and disturbed, he resolved to ask boldly whether Miss Davison was at home, and did so, on the opening of the door.

"Yes, sir," said the footman in answer to his inquiry, and he at once proceeded to show Gerard upstairs into the drawing-room, where the young man found himself face to face not with Rachel, but her younger sister, Lilian.

The girl was looking charming, her fair hair, which she still wore tied with a large bow of ribbon at the back of the neck and hanging down her back, shone in the glare of the electric light like gold; while the

simple frock of pale pink cotton and the schoolgirl black sailor hat with a pale pink ribbon, suited her girlish face and figure to perfection.

She greeted the visitor with frank pleasure.

"I'm so glad to see you again," said she. "I know how much Rachel likes you, and how kind you were at the Academy. And you like Rachel, don't you? That is quite reason enough for me to be glad to see you."

There was something in this speech which made Gerard's heart leap up. "Rachel likes you." He was sure that there was no deceit, no pretense, about this charming schoolgirl, that what she said came naturally to her lips from her own knowledge, and he was touched and surprised to hear the confidence with which she spoke. It was almost as if she looked upon Gerard as a sort of possession of the family, to be greeted and treated as such.

"I've been waiting here ever so long," said she, with a sigh; "and I am so glad you've come to talk to me! Lady Jennings is out, and so is Rachel, and I've been amusing myself as well as I could with the papers the man brought me, and with looking out of the window. But it's so dull, and such a shame to have to waste one's time like that when I so seldom come to town!"

"Didn't they expect you?" asked Gerard, in surprise.

A sort of hesitancy appeared in the girl's manner.

"Why no," she said. "Something happened this morning that seemed odd to Miss Graham — that's the schoolmistress. A gentleman called to see me, and asked questions about Rachel, and didn't give his name; and as one of the junior mistresses was coming up, Miss Graham said I had better come too, and see Rachel and Lady Jennings about it."

A horrible fear, of a kind to which he was now getting used in matters that concerned Rachel Davison, assailed his heart at these words. Who could the mysterious gentleman be who had come on such a strange errand, not to Rachel herself, but to her younger sister, a mere schoolgirl?

"You did quite right in coming," he said, after a short pause. "It does seem an odd sort of thing to happen."

"Yes," replied she innocently. "Although he did not give his name, Miss Graham took it for granted, from the way he spoke, that he was some relation or old friend of ours, until he saw me; and then, when I didn't recognize him, and he said merely that he was an old friend of our father's, she began to think it rather strange. However, I'm bound to say he was very nice, and that I was quite glad to see him; and if Miss Graham hadn't thought it odd, I don't know that I should have done so. Why shouldn't an old friend of my father's come and see me?"

"Why, the strange part of it was his not giving his name, of course," said Gerard.

"Yes, I suppose so. He looked like a military man, with his white mustache and way of holding himself; and most of our old friends are or were in the army. So I asked him and he said 'Yes,' and that he had been in the army some years ago. That was all. But very likely Rachel will know more about him."

Gerard sincerely hoped that Rachel would not have reason to regret the appearance of the military-looking man who had been in the army, and would not give his name. But the strange episode suggested to his mind that the police were making inquires about the Davisons, and that the white-mustached gentleman would prove to be one of their emissaries.

"It's very strange that neither she nor Lady Jennings should be back to dinner, isn't it?" she went on. "It's past eight, and they usually dine at half-past seven, I know; and I'm so dreadfully hungry!"

"Are you going back to Richmond to-night?"

"I hope not," replied she merrily; "because I should like Lady Jennings to invite me to stay the night, and to take me to a theatre. But it's getting too late for anything that begins before nine!" she added with a sudden change to a dismal look, as she glanced at the ormolu clock which stood on a bracket on the wall.

"I should have thought you'd be having holidays now," said he, "at the end of July."

"Yes, we have broken up, and I'm only staying on there until Rachel has made up her mind what I'm to do during the holidays. Perhaps she and I and mamma shall all go away together somewhere, but it depends on Rachel's work," she added, with a sort of earnest pride that seemed to Gerard infinitely touching.

"It's very irregular, this work of hers," he said, in a voice which shook in spite of himself.

He wanted to learn what he could, but it seemed dreadful to have to talk about it to this child, who rejoiced so openly in her sister's cleverness, and had no thought of harm or of wrong.

"Oh yes, very," replied Lilian quickly. "That's the worst part of it, that she never knows what she will have to do next, and has to be at the beck and call of the people who employ her. It's dreadful to me," she said, with sudden earnestness, "to have to know that poor Rachel is making herself a martyr to me and mamma, and working too hard, much too hard, just to earn money for us. I do so wish I could do something to help her; but I have no talent at all for anything, and can never hope to be anything but a burden to anybody."

"I don't think," answered Gerard, smiling, "that you will really have to look upon yourself in that light very long! I think I can answer for it that you'll find quite a number of people not merely willing, but anxious, to take the burden, as you call it,

off your sister's shoulders very quickly indeed, when once you're 'out.'"

"You mean that somebody will want to marry me?" asked Lilian, with a sort of blushing archness and shyness combined, which he thought charming.

"Yes. The moment you are 'out' I prophesy that you will be snapped up," said Gerard.

But Lilian's fair face clouded again.

"Ah," she said, "that coming out will be another great expense for poor Rachel. She's determined that I shall be presented at Court, and the expense of that will be horrible."

Gerard was aghast. Timidly, hesitatingly aware that he was on delicate ground, he ventured to suggest obstacles.

"But don't you think," he said, "that if you were to assure her that you would much rather not be presented, that it would be a useless sacrifice of money, if I may say so, she would be persuaded?"

"I think it would be waste of money, too," said Lilian, with a long face; "but she is very determined. She says all the women of our family have always been presented, and I must be. But what I say is, that in that case she ought to be presented first."

"Quite right. And what did she say to that?"

"She said she was afraid she would not be eligible, because of having to work for firms in trade. And that in any case she hadn't the time."

"But if she isn't eligible," said Gerard, more

earnestly than ever, "perhaps it would affect your position too; and think what a dreadful thing it would be if the presentation were to be cancelled! That happens sometimes, when any circumstances come to the knowledge of the Lord Chamberlain that — that —"

He grew confused, and stopped. He knew very little about Court Presentations, but was conscious that in the circumstances it would be madness to think of this one.

"But she's an artist, and not engaged in trade herself, unless you call selling her designs trade," said the girl rather distantly.

"Oh yes, yes, of course I know that. But — but the Chamberlain's distinctions are not at all logical. The wives of small professional men and stockbrokers are eligible; and a lot of Americans get in who would never get presented if they were in a similar position in England to that which they hold in their own country; while no actress is eligible, however great her genius or however noble her character, and even women of rank lose their rights if they engage in trade. Altogether, there's nothing to be gained by presentation now that the middle classes go to Court *en masse*, and if I were you I would very strongly urge your sister not to persist in her plan for you."

They were talking so earnestly, the girl impressed by his tones, and he excited by his fears for the result of the rash act suggested, that neither heard

footsteps outside the door, and both were surprised when it opened, and Lady Jennings came in.

She was in her outdoor dress, having just come in, and was looking cross and worried. She greeted the girl kindly, but without losing her look of annoyance, and turned abruptly to Gerard.

"Ah, Mr. Buckland, how do you do?" she said, holding out her hand to him. "I hope you've come to tell me what has become of Rachel. She made an appointment with me at my club at seven, and has never turned up. She is getting frightfully unpunctual and tiresome."

Lilian uttered a little cry of dismay, and Gerard glanced quickly towards her to remind his hostess of the young girl's presence.

Lady Jennings uttered an impatient sigh.

"Can you tell me anything about her?" she asked imperiously. "I'm told you brought back her cloak."

"Yes, I met her and took her to have some tea. She had done a long afternoon's shopping and was tired."

"Afternoon's shopping! Why, she had nothing to buy but a few veils and gloves, that I could have bought in half an hour," cried Lady Jennings impatiently, thus confirming his own doubts as to Rachel's account of her occupation that afternoon. "And where did she go to when you left her?"

Gerard was nonplussed for a moment. He could

not say that he had thought she was coming straight home, as that would certainly put Rachel herself into an awkward position when she did make her appearance. So he said —

"I understood that she was coming here, but I think she may have missed her cloak and gone back for it to the shops she had been to."

This was a good suggestion, and for the time Lady Jennings was partly appeased. She turned to Lilian, heard almost without listening the girl's account of the reason of her visit, and then suggested that they should all go down to dinner together.

But Gerard excused himself, and took his leave.

He knew that there was trouble ahead; that this mysterious visit to the schoolgirl sister on the part of the white-haired gentleman who would not give his name, could only mean disaster for Rachel.

He was torn with anxiety on her account, and, forgetting his disgust, his doubts, his fears, he set about contriving some way of helping her to escape from the difficulties which threatened her.

He excused his eagerness in this perhaps questionable work, by telling himself that he did not, after all, know anything against her, that all his suspicions were mere surmise. But the very fact that he feared arrest for her betrayed his real belief, and he himself felt ashamed that he was so eager on her behalf.

More and more startling, as he knew her better, had grown the difference between her character as

unfolded in her confidential talk, and the avocations of which he more than suspected her. She spoke and looked like a woman of the highest honor, the strongest sense of right and duty; and yet on every side he met with circumstances which seemed to point to her being engaged in crime!

One hope, and only one, remained to him; this was that she could be proved to be acting under an impulse so irresistible that what she did was no longer to be called crime at all, but irresponsibility. But though he had frequently heard the plea put forward on behalf of this or that woman afflicted in a similar manner, it was not surprising that, in spite of himself, he shrank from accepting, fully and straightforwardly, this explanation of the conduct of the woman whom, in the face of every doubt, he felt that he still loved.

Wistfully, despairingly, he still clung to the hope that some other way out of the difficulty would be found; that the mystery about her would be cleared up satisfactorily, and that he would be able once more to look upon her with the adoring eyes of his first day's acquaintance.

In the meantime, uneasy and perturbed, he conceived the idea of going in the direction of the police-station which was nearest to the stores, with the vague notion that he might learn something in that neighborhood of what had happened that afternoon.

So he went part of the distance by train, and

part on foot, and approached the police-station at a slow pace, looking about him observantly.

The sight that met his eyes as he drew near seemed to turn him to stone. Rachel Davison, closely veiled and with bent head, was being led into the building, with a policeman on one side of her and a man on the other, whom he recognized by his dress as the one he had seen going out of the tea-shop that evening, after giving her a sign that she was to come out.

She had been arrested then, after all!

CHAPTER IX

Gerard was puzzled; he had long since ceased to be capable of horror at anything he saw done in connection with Rachel Davison.

He did not even feel sure that she had been arrested; for he knew by this time that she was, as she had said, quite capable of taking care of herself, and that, although it looked as if she were in charge of the policeman and a detective, she might yet succeed in escaping from their clutches.

But the amazement he felt on seeing her taken into the police-station, after she had been able to get out of the stores in safety, was so intense that he could do nothing but stare at the three figures as they disappeared into the police-station, and at the cab which had brought them as it stood waiting outside.

One very striking circumstance he noted as she disappeared from his sight. Her appearance had completely changed since he had seen her last, less than two hours ago.

When he had put her into the hansom outside the tea-shop and directed the driver to take her to Lady Jennings' house, she had been dressed in pale blue, with a big hat of the deep color of a sapphire. He

had noted this particularly, as he was struck with the taste of her dress and had vaguely wondered why other girls could not manage to look as well dressed as she always did.

She had had no cloak with her, as she had left behind her, in the tea-shop, the handsome dark-blue mantle, lined with the paler color, which he had himself taken to Lady Jennings' for her.

Now, however, Miss Davison was wearing, not the big blue hat, but a small dark toque swathed round with one of those large gauze motor-veils which can be used as an effectual mask for the features.

And her figure was disguised as effectually as her face; for she wore a large black garment with voluminous sleeves, and as one side of it flew back when she ascended the steps to the police-station he noted that there was, fastened to the hem, a square white price-ticket, indicating plainly that the mantle was new from some shop.

This incident seemed to him conclusive and stupefying.

After her narrow escape — if it was altogether an escape, which he did not yet know — of that afternoon, and after directing him to tell the cabman to take her home, Miss Davison would appear to have changed her mind, and to have immediately seized the opportunity of being alone to do a little more shoplifting!

Reluctant as he was to come to this conclusion,

there seemed to be no other to come to. For he knew she had not been home, on the one hand, and yet she was wearing a different hat and mantle since he had last seen her!

As for any possibility that he could have been mistaken as to the identity of the lady in the brand-new cloak and the motor-veil, he knew there was none. Closely as she was wrapped up, Rachel had made far too deep an impression upon Gerard for him to fail to recognize not merely the figure, but the carriage and the walk, of the woman who had attracted him more than any other in the world.

He waited at a distance of a few yards to see what would happen.

There was a long pause, and then a policeman came out and spoke to the cabman and went into the police-station again.

Another pause, and then there came out from the police-station a group of people, among whom Gerard recognized two of the assistants from the stores, together with a man who looked like a manager, by his dress, his air of importance, and the deference paid him by the other two. There were also two women, one old and one young, whom he supposed to be two more assistants, and the bearded man whom Gerard had supposed to be a doctor.

One of the women was carrying the very toque and cloak which he had just seen Miss Davison wearing. This one was put by the rest into the cab which was

waiting, and driven away, while the rest of the party broke up into twos, and walked in the opposite direction from where Gerard was standing.

There was another pause, and then a policeman came out from the station and whistled for a cab, and a four-wheeler drove up.

Gerard began to grow sick with anxiety, for he guessed that the next person he should see would be Miss Davison, and he wondered whether she would be alone again, or whether she would be in custody.

But he was disappointed, for the next person to come out was the well-dressed, broad-shouldered young man whose back he had seen twice already, but whose face he had never yet contrived to see.

This man, still turning his back to Gerard, opened the door of the cab, and looked towards the police-station, out of which, a moment later, Rachel herself came, dressed once more in her own hat, and wearing her pale blue dress without any cloak. She ran quickly out and got into the cab, and the young man shut the door and remained for some minutes in earnest conversation with her, as he stood on the pavement.

Even then Gerard was unable to see his face; for the horse's head was turned towards Gerard, so that the young man had to turn in the opposite direction to talk to Miss Davison, who was sitting alone in the cab.

Gerard wondered what had happened. She had

been made to give up the new hat and cloak which she had worn when she came to the police-station. Yet now she was allowed to go away, without escort, so that apparently she had not been made prisoner.

Suddenly and most illogically he was seized with frantic jealousy of the man beside the cab, whom he had at first taken for a detective, but whom he now began to think must be a friend who had interceded for her, and who had succeeded in getting her freedom.

Had he only become bail for her appearance? But in that case she would have been taken before a magistrate in the first place, he was aware; and he doubted whether there had been time for that, even if it had been possible to take her away by some back door, and bring her back to the police-station in the same way, which would surely not have been necessary if she had been allowed to go out on bail.

It was only one more of the many mysteries which surrounded Miss Davison like a network, and Gerard stared helplessly at her in the darkness which was now complete but for the light of the gas-lamps, which were not near enough to cast a light upon her face, the cab having stopped not exactly opposite to the police-station, but a few steps farther down the street.

When the man stepped back from the cab, raising his hat in farewell, Miss Davison's face advanced a

little into the light, and Gerard was at last able to see her plainly. She looked haggard, fatigued, and excited, and it was plain that she had just been through another harrowing experience.

Suddenly her expression changed to one of alarm, and he saw that she had recognized him.

Putting her head out of the window, she called to the driver, who had just started his horse, to stop, and beckoning imperiously to Gerard, waited at the cab-window for him to come up.

As he did so, he looked round for the other man, anxious to get a good look at him; but, in the moment when Gerard had been occupied with Miss Davison, the well-dressed man who never showed his face had disappeared.

Gerard came slowly to the cab-window, raised his hat in sullen silence, and waited for her to speak.

For a moment she appeared not to know what to say to him. Then, in a ferocious undertone, she said —

"You've been playing the spy!"

"Well, what if I have?"

She looked at him for a few moments, panting and angry, before she answered —

"You have no right to do it, no right at all. Do you think I haven't troubles and cares enough, without your adding to them by this insulting persecution?"

He drew himself up.

"I can scarcely argue the point here," he said coldly.

"Of course not. Let me see." She paused, and looked as it were stealthily out of both windows. He wondered whether she was looking for the man who had been speaking to her a moment before, the man who had beckoned her out of the tea-shop; and his absurd jealousy was roused again. "You had better come with me as far as Lady Jennings'," she said coldly; "then you will perhaps be satisfied that, for the present, at least, you have no further need to play the spy."

For a moment he hesitated, and then he accepted the invitation. At any rate, he could warn her of Lilian's visit, and of the message she had brought. Inconsistent and even unwarrantable as he felt his partisanship of this girl to be, he was glad of the opportunity of putting her on her guard against further dangers.

He got inside the cab, and seated himself opposite to her.

They drove in silence for some minutes; then she turned to him fiercely —

"What made you come here? Did you follow me all the way from the tea-shop?"

"No. The girl brought out your cloak, which you had left on a chair, and I took it to Lady Jennings'. There, of course, I found that you had not

come home, as you had said you were going to do."

"I see. And what did you do next?"

She spoke with great irritation, not unmixed with fear.

"I — I came this way."

"But why? I know it can't have been accidental, your coming to such a place as this."

"It was not, of course. I came because I was interested in the shop-lifting affair that occurred at the stores this afternoon, and thought that the nearest police-station would be the place where I was most likely to get further information about it."

"And did you?"

He hesitated.

"I saw you come," he said presently, in a low voice; "and I saw the others. I saw — oh, why should I tell you? You know all about it. It's horrible. Of course I know you are justified in saying it is no business of mine; but still I hate the thought of it all. And, besides, you may put it, if you like, that it is merely because I'm puzzled and curious, and want to understand it all. Why did you pretend you were going home, when you were coming here? Who was the man who beckoned you out of the tea-shop, and who spoke to you just now? I want to know all these things, and you may say it is merely curiosity, if you choose."

Miss Davison was sitting back, closing her eyes

wearily, as if she scarcely heard and did not at all care what he was saying. When he had finished speaking she made no attempt to answer him, did not even open her eyes. There was a long pause. Then he said —

"Why don't you answer my questions? Is it because you can't, or because you don't care what people think?"

Then she opened her eyes, with an expression of helpless boredom.

"Why should I answer you? What right have you to question me? If I choose to say I am going home, you should be satisfied. And if you follow me, as you suppose, and find I have not gone home, you should shrug you shoulders, and tell yourself that it it no affair of yours. As for what you saw to-night, what did it amount to? You saw me go into the police-station — and you saw me go out of it. Is it absolutely necessary for me to report the fact to you, if I get my pocket picked?"

"Of course not. But — the change in your dress was singular!"

"I don't think I'm called upon to explain that; but you can know if you like. I did not wish to be recognized, as I went in, and so I borrowed some clothes that, as I supposed, effectually disguised me." She turned to him fiercely again. "Surely your ill-natured suspicions ought to be set at rest, since you saw that I came out as freely as I went in!"

"I said nothing about suspicions; but I have something to tell you. I found your sister at Lady Jennings' house, and she had come with a strange message."

Foreseeing bad news of some kind, Miss Davison changed her languid, listless attitude, and sitting up, looked at him apprehensively.

"Well, well, go on. Do you know what brought her?"

"Yes. I'm very sorry, very sorry indeed to have to worry you with more anxieties when you are tired. But you had better be prepared to find both your sister and Lady Jennings rather puzzled."

"Oh, go on, go on," said Miss Davison impatiently.

"It seems that a gentleman called at Richmond — at the school — yesterday, I think —"

He had got no further when he saw by the sudden change which came over her face that Miss Davison's listlessness was entirely gone. She was alert, keen, desperately interested at once. He went on —

"This gentleman said he was an old friend of your father's, and that he had been in the army himself. But the singular part of the visit was that he did not give his name."

"Very singular, indeed," said Miss Davison.

But though her outward tranquillity was perfect, it did not deceive Gerard.

"Miss Graham thought you and Lady Jennings ought to know about the visit, because he asked a

good many questions about you. He was, I understand, a man past middle age, with an upright figure and a perfectly white mustache."

He saw at once that Miss Davison recognized the description, although she raised her eyebrows and said —

"Indeed! I suppose he was an old friend of my father's, and that it was only a whim to hide his name. It's absurd of Miss Graham to make so much fuss about the matter. If it had been anyone without any knowledge of us, who wanted to scrape acquaintance with Lilian, you may be sure he would have given some name, even if it had not been his own. People who have anything to be ashamed of don't do eccentric things."

The reasoning was admirable, and Gerard bowed his head in assent. But for all of that he knew that the information had thrown Rachel into a state of deadly fear, and that she was worrying herself with a new and unexpected anxiety.

For a long time neither spoke, and it was not until the cab had turned into Sloane Street, and they were quite near to Lady Jennings' house that Miss Davison turned suddenly to him again.

"You pretend to admire me, don't you?" she asked sharply.

"No. I don't pretend, Miss Davison."

"Well, you admire me, and you take an interest in me, if only because you look upon me as a

thorough, if rather clumsy appropriator of other people's property."

"You have no right to say that. You know it's not true."

"Well, whatever your motive may be, I want you, in consideration of this admiration, this interest, to make me a promise. Will you give me your word that you will cease this persecution of me, that you will take it for granted I have my own reasons for behaving as I do, and that, if I am a criminal, I shall be punished in due course, and justice will be satisfied? And will you, in addition to all this, promise me that you will say nothing to anybody about me or my doings, that you will try to consider me as unknown to you, that you will, in short, not only give up my acquaintance, but behave exactly as if I had never existed? Listen, Mr. Buckland. I know you to be an honorable man, and I believe you to be a chivalrous one. Won't you, at my earnest request, leave justice to take its course upon me without your interference, and without your knowledge, and leave me to be dealt with in the natural course of things as I deserve?"

"Why don't you explain? I'm sure you could if you wished. I won't believe you are guilty of a course of despicable crimes —"

"It's absolutely immaterial to me whether you believe that or not," retorted Miss Davison, cutting him short with superb disdain. "I don't ask you to be-

lieve I'm innocent: it's not the adjective most applicable to me. All I ask is that you should leave me alone, and that, as you have seen that the police have their eye upon me, you should take it for granted that they know what I'm about, and that, when they have proof enough, they will arrest me, bring me to justice, and punish me as I deserve."

"But I can't believe this — I can't believe the evidence of my own eyes!"

She laughed lightly, having quite recovered her self-possession, though she still looked pitifully pale and drawn.

"Why not? I don't wish you to believe anything else. Only — be quite sure that your eyes see aright, Mr. Buckland, and that you don't sometimes see more than there is to be seen. Now we are at Lady Jennings'. Are you coming in?"

There was no invitation in her look or tone.

"No," said Gerard shortly. "It is too late. Besides, I've been there already this evening."

"And your promise?"

"I shall not give you any promise."

He spoke with quiet resolution, but without menace of any sort.

Miss Davison looked grave.

"You mean to go on with this persecution? You mean to follow me about, to insult me by your suspicions —"

"You told me you did not care what I thought.

How then can any suspicions I may have be insulting?"

"Oh, don't let us quibble," said she impatiently. "I ask you to leave me alone. I wish to drop your acquaintance, but to do it amicably and without any ill-will. Or, if you won't do that, I ask you to bring specific charges against me, or even to give information about me to the police."

"Miss Davison!"

"Oh, I'm quite prepared for you to do that. Then I should have something definite to meet, I should understand your position. But that you, without any right to follow me about and persecute me, without any proof that I have ever done anything disgraceful or unlawful, should keep watch over my movements and spy upon my actions, should pay unexpected calls upon my friends and relations, and appear to be always at hand when anything unusual takes place in my family, I say it is infamous, intolerable. I won't put up with it, and I insist that you shall put an end to this persecution. Now — promise."

"I refuse to promise," said Gerard stubbornly.

The answer, though she might have expected it, seemed to disconcert her. She appeared to have thought that her determination, her cold, proud manner, her lofty indignation, would have had the effect of reducing him to submission to her will. To find him stubborn still surprised and perplexed her. They had

reached Lady Jennings' house, and the cab stopped. Gerard got out. Then Miss Davison, instead of getting out immediately and sweeping past him haughtily into the house, as he was prepared for her to do, sat still a moment, and suddenly threw at him a glance in which he read a thousand things that in a moment altered the opinion of her which her words would have formed. Instead of looking fierce, indignant, cold, hard, angry, and disdainful, she involuntarily let him see in her beautiful dark eyes, just for one short moment, the look which belied all the rest, the look of womanly gratitude and satisfaction which told that, mysterious as was her conduct, persistently unreasonable as was her attitude, and incensed as she had appeared to be by his obstinacy, she was at heart touched and melted by his pertinacious loyalty.

Gerard started forward, but before he could speak, Miss Davison, recollecting herself, sprang out of the cab, and ran up the steps to the house without a word or a look of farewell.

Gerard watched her without daring to follow her, with his heart and brain on fire.

The door opened quickly, and she disappeared into the house, and the footman came out to pay the cabman. But Gerard had already done that, and begun to walk away.

He threw one glance up at the window of the dining-room as he went. The lights were lowered, and the blind was drawn up to let the cool night air in

through the open window. And between the curtains, standing immovable, he saw the figure of Miss Davison, and knew that she was watching him, and wondered what she was thinking.

Remembering that last look of hers, in which the soul of the woman, grateful for admiration, grateful for love, had seemed to shine out upon him, he could not help the belief that she was thinking — and thinking kindly — of him.

CHAPTER X

Now Gerard Buckland, although he was very much in love, was not a fool. And it was not necessary to consider very deeply the facts connected with the brilliant Rachel Davison's existence to feel quite certain that, however handsome and however attractive she might be, it was the height of folly to lose one's heart to a woman of whom so much to her disadvantage was known to him.

Look at the incidents of the day in whatever way he might, it was impossible to escape from the conclusion that Miss Davison's share in them was one inconsistent with that innocence which, as she herself acknowledged, was not one of her most conspicuous qualities.

That was the worst of it, that she did not deny the mystery about her, but challenged him to find it out if he could. She said in effect that she chose to go her own way, that her way was one of which he would not approve, and that she did not care what he thought. She meant to follow her own inclination, and she was tired of his pursuit, and desired him to leave her alone for the future.

He on his side had made no pretense of hiding the

fact that he did not mean to do so, and while more bewildered than ever by what he had seen and heard that day, he maintained his determination to try every means in his power to get at the root of the mystery, and to find out the secret which was poisoning her life.

For that Rachel was unhappy he was sure. He remembered her face as he had first seen it a year ago at the Aldingtons' house, how bright her eyes were, how ringing her voice was. Now, although she was handsomer than ever in his eyes, with that sort of suggestion of thought and care underlying her beauty, which made it pathetic and haunting, now that the outline of her face had sharpened and grown more refined than ever, there was a look in her face which had never been in it before, a sort of defiant expression, as if she had made up her mind to a certain distasteful course of action, and meant to persevere in it in spite of everything.

Gerard was aware that this view of the change in the beauty might be a somewhat fanciful one; but fancy is generally very busy in the brain of a young man in love, and that he was still in love with Rachel Davison in the face of all he knew and all that he suspected, he had to acknowledge.

Was she a thief? That he would not believe. Was she a kleptomaniac? That was even more difficult to admit, since it was plain that, if kleptomania were a disease, it could not pay, whereas the occupation

followed by Rachel certainly appeared to pay very well.

If she had really been the heroine of the scene at the stores that day, she must, he knew, have found someone ready to stand by her, and to tell some story which found acceptance in the eyes of the persons concerned in the charge, and saved her from prosecution.

For it was impossible to believe that, worried and worn out as she was when he left her, she would not have been infinitely more distressed if she had known that a police prosecution was hanging over her.

Who was the man who had beckoned her out of the tea-shop, who had accompanied her to the police-station, and put her into the cab afterwards?

That was the one question, Gerard felt, upon which the whole mystery hinged. And he was conscious, absurd as he felt the sensation to be, that he was not only curious concerning that important personage, but actually jealous of him.

Was she in the power of some man who exercised over her an overwhelming and sinister influence? Was she under the power of hypnotic suggestion?

He could not but feel sure that the man he had so dimly seen would prove to have an important bearing upon the matter, and made up his mind that, at all hazards, he would find out who he was.

If it should prove to be the case that she herself

was only a more or less helpless instrument in the hands of a designing and unscrupulous man, then he felt that her position instead of being a guilty and infamous one, was pitiful in the extreme.

But the weak point in this argument was the fact that Miss Davison seemed to be, of all persons in the world, the least likely to be made a victim in the way suggested. While essentially feminine, she was high-spirited, active-minded, full of resolution and initiative, and wholly unlike the gentle, meek, lymphatic people who are the most readily subjected to such experiments.

But then he had heard that highly strung nervous temperaments are also among the subjects of experiments of one mind upon another; and whether Miss Davison could be made submissive to the will of another depended upon the strength of will in the person who obtained an influence over her.

This, then, was now Gerard's chief object: to find out and learn all he could about the mysterious man.

If the girl had been, by artful plans, entrapped into acting as one of a gang of expert thieves — and, horrible as this suggestion was, Gerard felt that it was one that had to be entertained — then it was the leader of the gang for whom he must look. And it was scarcely likely that this leader should have trusted himself inside the police-station. He thought, therefore, that he might dismiss the notion that the well-

dressed, young-looking man whom he had but half seen, could be the inspirer and fountain-head of the organization, if organization there were. Rather, Gerard thought, would he be a man set to act as a scout and spy, and to divert suspicion from his companions by posing as a friend who could answer for their character.

Gerard, true to his resolution not to let the matter drop, set about devising an excuse for calling upon Lady Jennings the very next day; but he was saved that trouble, for on the following morning he found on his breakfast-table a note from the old lady asking him to luncheon that day.

Delighted at this opportunity of seeing Rachel again, Gerard duly presented himself at a quarter past one at the pretty little house, where he found Lady Jennings by herself in the drawing-room.

She was not looking her usual serene self, but was flushed and irritable, although she greeted the young man with the kindness she had always shown him.

Gerard soon ventured to ask whether Lilian had gone back to school the previous night, and Lady Jennings frowned, though not ill-temperedly.

"No; I kept her here till this morning, and took her back myself as far as the station," she said. "She was in great distress, poor child, because her sister had been angry with her for coming. But of course she was quite right to come," added the old lady tartly.

"Yes, and it was Miss Graham who sent her, I understand?"

"Yes. Rachel has no right to be angry about it, but she is an odd girl, and full of caprices. I wish to know where you met her last night. I saw that you came back in the cab with her, but I cannot find out from her where she had been or what she had been doing. Now I quite understand that she is free to go about by herself, and to transact her business without interference; but as she is living in my house, and I feel, as it were, answerable for her, I think she ought to show me a little more consideration than she does, and that my curiosity when she misses the dinner-hour and has no very clear explanation to give is only natural. She says she was detained by business, and then she leaves her cloak in a tea-shop, and presently she returns home with you. So that you must have met her twice yesterday, Mr. Buckland, and can, I hope, satisfy what I am sure you will not think idle curiosity."

The old lady, having talked herself out of breath while Gerard was thus given an opportunity of considering a diplomatic reply, sat back and paused, looking at him with pursed-up lips, which he took as a sort of warning that she expected a straightforward and full answer.

He did not want to tell too much, or to put her on the track of Rachel's real movements by saying that he had met her at the stores.

But at the same time he felt that he might make worse mischief if he were to say something which Rachel herself would contradict.

So he said diplomatically —

"I met her casually, in the first place, near enough to a tea-shop in Westminster for us to go straight in there, as she looked tired."

"Westminster!" echoed Lady Jennings dryly, and he felt that he had probably "put his foot in it" already. "What was she doing there, I wonder? And where"— she turned upon him suddenly — "did you meet her the second time?"

What on earth was he to say? The truth was not to be thought of. He certainly could not tell her that he saw Rachel going into a police-station.

She perceived his hesitancy and spoke sharply —

"Of course, if it's a secret, I have no business to ask, I suppose."

"You have every right, Lady Jennings, to know all about Miss Davison's movements," answered he frankly; "but as I feel that you are asking me questions to which she herself has given you an insufficient answer, I feel, don't you see, as if I would rather not say more than this: that I met her not far from where I had left her before, and that I understood she had been detained on business connected with her work."

He felt, as he said this, that he wished it were not so true as he feared it was.

Lady Jennings half smiled. She approved of his attitude, but remained unsatisfied with that of her protégé.

"She works too hard," said Gerard suddenly after a silence. "I have noticed a great change in her looks. Her face now has a worried expression. I think she wants a long rest, and I wish she could take it; but I suppose while she is earning so much it's impossible."

The old lady turned upon him with a strange look.

"Yes, I suppose she does earn a great deal," she said rather dryly. "She seems to spend a great deal, at any rate."

"Yes. If she supports her mother and sister," said Gerard valiantly.

But the old lady shrugged her shoulders.

"Oh, one may make too much of that," she said quickly. "She spends money on herself too. She dresses magnificently. It wouldn't have been thought proper when I was young, for an unmarried girl to spend so much on her clothes. However, things are altered now, I suppose!"

"She dresses in excellent taste," observed Gerard.

"Oh yes. You take a great interest in Rachel, Mr. Buckland?"

The words were a challenge, and Gerard took it up promptly.

"Greater than I have ever in my life taken in a woman before," said he.

She shrugged her shoulders slightly.

"If I took an interest in any man who was in want of a wife," said she, "and who thought of looking in this direction, I should recommend him to choose the younger sister rather than the elder. Of course she's very young, but she's a sweet girl, and if she has less character, what she has is more amiable than her sister's."

Lady Jennings spoke with as much ill-nature as it was in her to show, though that was not very much. Gerard, however, took fire and made a brave stand for his own choice.

"Miss Lilian is a lovely girl," he said, "but pretty and charming as she is, I confess that a woman of more character has still greater charm for me. Now Miss Rachel has not only her beauty, but she has something besides, some soul, some capacity for deep feeling which, while no doubt it makes her miserable sometimes, makes her interesting too."

"She can be miserable no doubt, as well as other people," said Lady Jennings rather dryly; "but I think she has probably a still greater capacity for making others miserable."

"Certainly she would make a man miserable if he were head over ears in love with her and she didn't care for him," replied Gerard quickly; "for he would never be likely to find any girl to take exactly the place she had made for herself in his heart."

Before he had finished speaking he saw a look on

Lady Jennings' face which made him glance behind him, and he saw that Rachel herself had come in quietly while they were talking. It was clear that she had heard his words and understood them, and her pale face, which was very grave, lighted up a little.

She shook hands with him, and exerted herself to be lively and entertaining, and to dispel that slight feeling of resentment towards her which she knew that her erratic ways had caused her protectress to feel.

They went downstairs together, and she found an opportunity to ask him what he had said in answer to the questions about the day before, which she knew Lady Jennings must have put. She seemed satisfied and even grateful when he told her, and from that moment her spirits rose, so that she was the life and soul of the little party at luncheon.

When they rose from the table they all drifted towards the window, where Lady Jennings kept her little birds in a large aviary cage. Rachel was still very gay, and Lady Jennings' resentment had softened under the influence of the girl's exertions to amuse her.

Miss Davison was laughing and talking brightly when Gerard suddenly perceived a strange change in her, the brightness dying out of her eyes and the color out of her lips.

Glancing out of the window in search of the

cause, Gerard saw that a gentleman of the middle height, erect and of military appearance, with a snow-white mustache, was passing slowly, and looking up at the window as he did so; and he knew it was the visitor to Lilian who would not give his name.

CHAPTER XI

Gerard glanced at Rachel, but she was too much occupied with her own thoughts, as she stealthily watched the retreating figure of the erect, middle-aged gentleman with the snow-white mustache, to pay any attention to him, or to remark the shrewdness with which his eye followed the direction of hers.

The fact was that one glance at the stranger outside on the pavement, and then another at Rachel, had been enough to assure Gerard that he had at last found the key to the mystery which surrounded the actions of Miss Davison.

True, it was a key which he could not yet make use of, but he was none the less confident that he now had it in his hands.

The man in the white mustache, whom Miss Davison at once recognized, and whose appearance filled her with evident consternation, was, Gerard felt sure, the leader of the organization which was using the unhappy girl for its own illegal ends, and his first care, on noting this, was to hide every sign that he had seen anything.

So he turned to Lady Jennings to give Rachel an opportunity of recovering her composure.

He was still talking to the old lady when Rachel, taking out her watch, said —

"Oh, I forgot to tell you, Lady Jennings, that I have to be in the city again this afternoon by four o'clock. I shall only just manage it if I run away now. Do, do forgive me for having forgotten to tell you before."

But Lady Jennings was in no forgiving mood. The news thus suddenly sprung upon her transformed her at once from an angel of mildness into an embodiment of just indignation. Drawing herself up, she said —

"This is the third time during the last few days that you have done this, Rachel, disappointed me at the very moment when we have been going out together! I can't understand how you can make appointments and forget them in this manner. Even if I, who don't pretend to be a woman of business, were to do so, I should soon be in a state of hopeless confusion as to what I had to do and where I had to go."

"I'm very sorry," said Rachel meekly. But even as she spoke she was walking to the door. "But really you don't know how difficult it is to reconcile the two conditions, and to be a woman of business and a woman of leisure at the same time."

She went out of the room without giving time for

any more discussion, and Lady Jennings turned to Gerard indignantly. The young man had a sympathetic manner, and old ladies always found in him an interested hearer.

"Isn't it too bad of that girl," she asked, "to treat me in this manner? I make every allowance for the fact that she is a busy woman, and that business appointments have to take precedence of social engagements with her. But when she has expressly asked me to take her to call on certain people, and at the last moment she throws me over like this, I really feel that I have just reason to complain. One can't treat a duchess in this way, whatever one's position may be, and it was to meet the Duchess of Beachborough that I was going to take her this afternoon."

"Don't you think," suggested Gerard gently, "that it is because she is overworked that she is rather erratic in her ways just now? It seems to me that she looks paler every time I see her, and that her face has grown very much sharper in outline even during the past few weeks. Couldn't you persuade her to take a rest from business, and to go away for a thorough change? I feel it would do her all the good in the world. Six months abroad, for instance, might make a new woman of her."

The old lady shook her head.

"You forget her circumstances," said she. "How can a woman who has any sort of business connection, leave her work for six months? I don't know much

about these things, but I feel sure I am right in that."

Gerard knew that she was, and found it hard to continue his argument.

"At least," he suggested, "a six weeks' holiday, then, might be tried with advantage. Don't you think so?"

"She has been talking of taking a holiday," said Lady Jennings rather coolly, "but I don't want her to go with me. I want a little rest from her tiresome ways."

"Oh, I'm sorry to hear you say that," urged Gerard earnestly. "Feeling the interest I do in Miss Davison, I have always been so glad to think that she had by her a friend so judicious, so kind, and so considerate as you."

"Consideration is wasted upon a girl so self-willed. I don't mean to say anything against her. No doubt if she were not headstrong she would never have done anything for herself or her people. But I confess she has tried my patience lately."

"Why doesn't she go down to her mother for a little while?"

"She was talking of going away with her and with Lilian," said the old lady; "but I don't know whether she has decided upon anything. She seems now not to know her own mind for two minutes together."

Gerard felt afraid that it was because she was under the control of a mind other than her own, and was silent. Lady Jennings sighed.

"However," she said, "we must hope it is as you say, and that a holiday of some sort will work wonders in her. I wish you, who appear to have some influence with her —"

"Oh, no, no; I wish I had!" interpolated Gerard.

"I wish you would talk to her, and try to persuade her to be more reasonable. You might show her that she is doing herself — and consequently Lilian — a great deal of harm by her vagaries. People won't take the younger sister up, as Rachel wants them to do, if they find the elder is too much of a handful."

Gerard was dismayed by what he heard. He felt that if Lady Jennings were to throw Rachel over, the girl would be left entirely to the influence of those false friends who must, he felt sure, be already poisoning her happiness and spoiling her life. Ineffectual as Lady Jennings' friendship and protection appeared to be in restraining her in her reckless course of conduct, Gerard clung to the hope that a short period of rest might bring reflection, and that, as long as her best friends stood by her, she might at least be saved from giving herself up wholly to the bad influences which were at work upon her, and that he himself might, by probing the mystery surrounding her to the very bottom, be able to save her from her dangerous acquaintances, by threatening to put the police on the track of the gang.

"I will talk to her," said he, in a low voice; "though I'm afraid it won't have much effect."

"She likes you very much, I know. She uses you as an example of what a man should be," said Lady Jennings.

Gerard's face brightened in spite of himself.

"Does she really?"

"Only this morning she did, in speaking to her sister. Will you, Mr. Buckland, dine with us to-morrow night, and see what you can do with her?"

"I'm afraid I'm engaged to-morrow night."

"What night can you come?"

"I've got to go down to some friends on the river for the week end. That will take me up to Monday."

"And this is Thursday. Let me see. How will Wednesday next suit you?"

"I should be delighted to come."

Gerard was on his feet, most anxious to get away, for he had heard the door shut after Rachel, and he was determined to follow her and to witness, if possible, her meeting with the man of the white mustache. He shook hands with his hostess, and went away with the proper air of leisured reluctance.

But when once he was outside, he went up the street at a great pace, taking it for granted that Rachel, who was no longer in sight, would have gone in the same direction as the stranger.

He slackened his pace when he got to Sloane

Square, and taking great care never to leave the shelter of a crowd, a matter which was easy enough at that time in the afternoon, he looked about him in all directions for a sign of either the white-haired man or Miss Davison.

And at last he caught sight of them both, the man a little in front of the girl, making their way to the station.

They had no sooner disappeared than Gerard crossed the road hastily in pursuit, and, still taking care to keep himself out of their sight, watched them go down the stairs; taking a ticket himself, he followed them down to the platform, where they were now engrossed in conversation.

Gerard had deliberately set himself the task of getting as near as he could to them without being seen, in order to overhear, if possible, enough of their conversation to know in what relation these two stood to each other.

And, even before he heard a word they were saying, he knew by what he saw all that he wanted to know.

For the white-haired stranger, who was a handsome, well-preserved man of about sixty years of age or perhaps a little younger, was evidently laying down the law to Miss Davison, quietly but emphatically, speaking in such a low voice that not a word he uttered went beyond her ears, but so effectively that the girl, who was trembling as she stood with

bent head before him, listened in absolute submissive silence to what Gerard felt must be directions, commands.

Not until their train came in with the usual rattle and roar, and the hurrying movement among the passengers began, did the white-haired man raise his voice. Then Gerard, from behind them, as they moved towards the train, caught these words uttered by Miss Davison in a tone of despair —

"Won't you let me off? Haven't I done enough?"

He did not hear the answer, but he heard a little faint moan from the girl, which told him that her request had been refused. Then he heard the man's voice, as he whispered something quickly into the girl's ear, and, raising his hat, immediately hurried on to a smoking carriage.

Left by herself, Miss Davison got into a first-class compartment, into which Gerard followed her. She went quickly to the extreme end of it, and sitting down with her back turned towards him, affected to be reading a letter.

But he knew very well that she could not see, that she was quietly shedding tears, and that, having heard him get in without guessing who he was, she had used the pretense of the letter so that, bending over it, she could dry her eyes furtively without, as she believed, being observed.

The train started, no other passengers having got in with them.

They stopped at the next station, and still Rachel had not moved. Gerard's heart bled for her. He knew that she was miserable, that she was being coerced, that she was suffering tortures, which must be doubly keen to a woman as proud as she was, and that she was in such a position that she could not go for comfort or advice to any of her friends.

What the conditions were which the white-haired man had insisted upon with her, what the work was that he commanded her to do, he could not, of course, tell. But that there was something distasteful in the work, something shocking, terrible to her, in the task he had insisted upon her performing, was no longer open to question.

The words he had heard her utter in remonstrance to the man still rang in Gerard's ears.

"Won't you let me off? Haven't I done enough?"

What was it that she had done already? What was it that he now wanted her to do? In spite of all he knew, and all he had seen and heard, in spite of the suspicions which would crop up at every point of their acquaintance, concerning the mysterious work upon which Miss Davison was engaged, Gerard had never ceased to ask himself whether there might not be some possible explanation of the suspicious cir-

cumstances, some more favorable interpretation to be put upon her mysterious actions, than the obvious one that she was engaged in some sort of criminal enterprise, or that she was not responsible for her actions.

This meeting with the man of the white mustache seemed to make the latter hypothesis untenable. Kleptomaniacs do not act under orders; they steal from impulse and impulse alone.

Whereas Rachel was plainly under orders, acting against her own will, and at the instigation of someone with a will stronger than her own.

It was utterly incomprehensible to Gerard how a woman of Miss Davison's birth and breeding, a woman who had seemed to him exceptionally high-principled, honest, fearless, and strong-willed, should so far have stifled all the natural and acquired instincts and principles of an honorable woman as to have listened to the suggestions of a man engaged in some sort of nefarious enterprise.

Was the theory of hypnotism to be considered? Gerard knew very little about the subject, but had a vague idea that persons under hypnotic influence, far from protesting, as he had heard her do, against the power they feel, act like machines, without strength enough to protest against the will that makes them commit acts at which, were they free agents, their minds might well revolt in horror and dismay.

His heart went out to the girl, in spite of all that he had heard; and, touched to the quick by the misery which he knew her to be suffering, he suddenly left his seat, placed himself near her on the opposite side of the compartment, and said in a low earnest voice —

"Miss Davison, what is troubling you? Won't you speak to me?"

The girl started back, dashed away the tears which had gathered in her eyes, and sat up and faced him.

"Have you been here all the time, watching me, spying on me again?"

Her tone was not passionate, or even indignant. She was worn out, irritable, impatient. That was all.

"I got in when you got in. Yes, call it spying if you like, I followed you from Lady Jennings' house."

"Of course," interrupted she impatiently. "I thought I had slipped away without your seeing me, but I might have known you were too clever for me. Pray, what made you come?"

She had dashed away her tears, sat up, and tried to resume her ordinary manner. She was evidently not sure how much he knew, and was trying to "bluff."

Gerard looked down and answered quietly. He must tell her all he knew, in the hope that she would then admit the rest.

"I came because I knew — or at least I guessed

— that you were going to meet someone, someone whom you saw from the window."

She flushed with surprise.

"You have keen eyes!" she said sarcastically.

She might mean that he had seen more than there was to be seen, or merely that she admitted there was something to see which he had been quick to notice.

"They are keen where you are concerned, Miss Davison. It is no secret to you, or to anybody who knows us, that whatever concerns you is of the deepest interest to me."

She made a movement as if she would have answered him in the same tone as before, with sarcasm, with coldness, with an air of being offended; but before she could utter a word, she glanced askance at him, and something in his look and manner made her expression change. She looked down suddenly, and he saw her lower lip quiver.

"I do wish you wouldn't," she said querulously, like a child. "Of what use is it to be interested in me, considering what you think?"

"It's too late for me to ask if it's of any use," said he. "Besides, isn't it just possible that it may be of use — to you — to know that there is someone to whom you could go if you were in a difficulty, someone who knows so much already that there would be little harm in telling him the rest?"

She threw a frightened glance at him.

"You know nothing," she said sharply. "You may guess a great deal, and put a wrong construction upon everything; but you really know nothing whatever."

He hesitated a moment, and then said —

"I know that you are in some way in the power, or under the influence of a man who wishes you to do things against which you revolt."

It was evident that, whatever she might pretend, Miss Davison was startled by this statement.

"How do you know?" she asked abruptly.

He went on, without answering her question —

"And that you have protested, and protested apparently in vain, against his suggestions, or orders."

Then she understood, and did not pretend to misunderstand or deny any longer —

"You have been eavesdropping," she said contemptuously.

"I would not scruple to do anything that would lead to a better understanding of the marvel that makes a well-bred, honorable woman do things which she is ashamed of, and that she does not dare to mention to her family and friends," retorted Gerard boldly.

She stared at him, with her lips parted, her eyes very wide open, her breast heaving. Both were in terrible earnest.

"You talk nonsense," she said at last sharply. "All your listening and spying only result in your

learning half the truth; and if you were wise, not to say chivalrous, you would take it for granted that you were mistaken in your evil thoughts of me, and that there is just something to be learned which I do not choose to tell you, and which you have no possible right to know."

He looked at her steadily.

"I wish I could believe you," he said. "I wish to Heaven I could. But it's impossible to credit that you, a young girl, should have secrets from all your friends and relations in which there is no harm."

She faltered and her eyes fell under his gaze.

"Harm!" she echoed, in a hoarse voice. "There are different degrees of harm. What one person thinks justifiable may shock and disgust another person. If your ideas of what is right are so very lofty, you have no right to take for granted that mine, which may be rather lower, are degrading and wholly unjustifiable."

"I take nothing for granted. I only see that you are miserable and unhappy, and that you are so because you are acting against your conscience at the bidding of a person whom you fear and whose influence you know to be bad," retorted Gerard.

She made an impatient movement.

"Why begin the old arguments all over again?" she said shortly. "Why don't you see for yourself that I have willingly and with open eyes

adopted a certain course, and why don't you leave me alone to endure the punishment if I have done wrong, or to receive the reward if I have done right? Believe me, you are only harassing me, adding to my troubles and embarrassments by your persistent persecution. Nothing will turn me from the course I have entered upon, about which I will only say this, that I entered upon it of my own free will, with entire knowledge of its promises and possible rewards, and of its disadvantages as well."

"I would leave you alone if you were happy," burst out Gerard. "It is because I see you are miserable and harassed, because I hear you imploring to be let off doing that which you have been ordered to do, that I beg you to leave this career, and its rewards, and the rest of it, at any rate for a time. If you would only leave London for a while, go away somewhere and rest and forget this work and all its troubles, I would be content. But until you do, until I know that you are taking the rest and holiday you need, I shall continue what you call my persecution, in the hope of being near you at the moment — which is sure to come — when you will want a friend to stand by you, a better one than those for whom you are working now."

He was conscious that he was weak in argument, and that his lame words would have but little effect against the resolve which set her mouth firm and shone in her mournful eyes.

What he had not been prepared for, however, was the gentleness with which she received this tirade, as she stood up in the compartment and prepared to get out at the next station.

"You are only adding to my difficulties," she said, in a tone of mournful resignation. "I quite appreciate the kindness of your motives, but your actions worry and harass me. In gratitude for your good intentions I say 'Thank you.' But in self-defense, as you are with the best will in the world doing me a decided injury, I must say also: I wish to Heaven I had never met you, and that I may, now that I have had the misfortune to meet you, never meet you again."

She ended with a sort of stifled sob.

The cruel words stabbed Gerard to the heart. He uttered an incoherent protest, but she would not listen. Going quickly to the end of the compartment, she remained standing, with her back turned towards him and without uttering another word, until the train stopped at the next station, when she hurriedly got out, ran up the steps, and jumped into a hansom, leaving him, remorseful, uneasy, and miserable, on the platform.

He had jumped out after her, but saw that it was ridiculous to think of further pursuit.

But a glance at the moving train as it went out of the station showed him, in one of the compart-

ments, the face of the white-haired gentleman, with a faint smile on his cold features.

And Gerard, who saw that the mysterious stranger was looking at him, with a sort of faint, cold contempt upon his face, wondered vaguely whether he had not seen those well-cut features, and that inscrutable expression, somewhere before that day.

And as he walked away and thought the matter over, the impression grew stronger and stronger upon him that, either in a picture or in the flesh, he had seen the man's face before.

CHAPTER XII

It was on the very last day of July, when the season had come to an end, and streams of luggage-laden cabs were flowing in the direction of all the great railway stations, that Gerard kept the engagement he had made with Lady Jennings, and arrived at her house in time for dinner.

During the days which had elapsed since the luncheon at her house, and his pursuit of Miss Davison and the mysterious white-haired man, Gerard had seen and heard nothing whatever of the girl, and had indeed done his best to think of other things, and to push her image out of the unduly prominent position which it had occupied in his mind if not in his heart.

The attempt had been, of course, unsuccessful. And it was with the strongest possible feelings of passionate interest, and in a state of keen excitement, that he presented himself again at the house of her old friend and protectress, and found his heart beating high at the thought of seeing her again.

Lady Jennings, however, came into the drawing-room alone, and though three or four other guests

came in almost immediately, Miss Davison did not appear.

Gerard's spirits sank when the gong sounded, and they all went down to dinner, and he saw, with dismay, that all the places were filled, and that the woman in whom his thoughts were centered was absent from the circle.

No explanation of her absence was asked for by anybody.

He was so depressed that, although he of course took his share in the general conversation and exerted himself to appear unmoved by his disappointment, he felt sure that his hostess noticed it. When she and the other ladies left the room, he asked the oldest of the men present, who was a constant visitor at the house, what had become of Lady Jennings' young friend and protégée.

"Oh, haven't you heard? There's been a split, I believe, a misunderstanding, quarrel, or something serious of that sort. I don't know the details myself, and I can't find out more than that. But Lady Jennings is very sensitive about it, and will not broach the subject with anybody, while one gets snubbed if one starts it oneself."

Gerard was on thorns.

"When did it happen?" he asked quickly.

"I don't know exactly; but it was within the last few days. One by one her friends, as they called,

found Miss Davison missing, and gradually so much has leaked out, and no more. So be warned."

But Gerard could not accept the warning; he did not care two straws about Lady Jennings' anger, compared with Rachel's fate. And he had already decided to ask his hostess direct what had become of her young companion.

In the meantime the gloomiest doubts and forebodings filled his heart. Even that latest adventure with her had not cured the longings he felt for a sight of her, for a touch of her hand, for a look into those beautiful, mournful, enigmatic eyes, which had stirred him as no woman's eyes had ever done before.

He made an opportunity of approaching Lady Jennings, and at once, in defiance of the warning he had received, asked where Rachel was, and whether she had consented to take a holiday.

The old lady's face hardened, and her manner grew cold as she answered —

"I don't know what has become of her, Mr. Buckland; I have broken off the acquaintance."

"Is it indiscreet to ask on what grounds?" asked Gerard steadily.

"Well, yes, I should say it is indiscreet, decidedly. But as I know you take an interest in the girl, I'll tell you the reason. She has formed an acquaintance with some people of whom I don't approve — Americans."

Gerard looked surprised. He knew that he had met several charming Americans at the house. The old lady perceived his bewilderment.

"Oh, I don't object to these Van Santens because they're Americans," she explained; "but because they are a type of Americans whom I dislike, and of whom I disapprove."

Gerard had heard the name of Van Santen and knew that these people had made some sort of stir in certain circles during the past season by novel and tasteful entertainments, which had earned them the way into a good "set."

"I don't know them," he said; "but I know some people who do, and who find them very charming."

"I've no doubt," retorted the old lady icily; "but I am old-fashioned, and these Sunday bridge-parties which they give down at a place they have hired in Hertfordshire are things of which I strongly disapprove. I don't like the thing, to start with, and I don't like the way it is done, as far as I have heard anything of it."

"I'm sorry to hear there has been a rupture between you and Miss Davison upon such an unimportant matter."

"Oh, it is important in my eyes, though I dare say some people might think me too strict. But, as you must know, we have been getting on so much less well together for some time, that a comparatively

small thing was able to complete the separation. We won't refer to it further, please. I will only say this, that my quarrel, or disagreement — whatever you like to call it — with the elder sister, will not prevent my doing what I can for the younger. And I hope that Rachel's absence from my house will not cause you to forsake it, Mr. Buckland."

Of course Gerard protested that it would not, and equally of course he knew in his own heart that he would never care to come near the place again. He cherished quite an unreasonable resentment, indeed, against the old lady, for what he felt to be an unjustifiable desertion of Rachel in her hour of need; and this in spite of his knowledge that Rachel was one of those difficult persons to deal with who make their own troubles, and persist in their own chosen line of conduct in defiance of the will and wishes of anybody.

The evening was a dull and tiresome one for him, and when he got to his rooms that night he spent two or three hours in deep thought on the subject of Rachel, and was surprised and ill pleased to find how deeply he felt the disappointment at not having seen her.

He remembered where he had heard talk about the Van Santens, the lively and charming Americans who had supplied a fresh zest that year to the entertainments of London society. It was at the Aldingtons' that he had heard the family discussed,

and Arthur Aldington had been quite proud of being invited to their house, as the Americans had found open to them the doors of many houses which would have been rigidly closed to English people of the standing which the Van Santens occupied in their native country.

So on the following Sunday he went down to the Aldingtons' house on the river, where they spent the summer months, and found out all he could about this American family of whom Lady Jennings disapproved.

Arthur was delighted to talk about them, and expatiated upon the superior charm of American over English girls, and especially about the dainty beauty and grace of Cora Van Santen, who, he said, was quite the most charming girl he had met in London that season.

"Would you like to know them?" asked Arthur, quite proud to introduce his handsome friend among his new and smart acquaintances. "If so, I'll take you down in the car one Sunday. They keep open house on Sunday always, whether in town or in the country; and I have a general invitation, and can bring a friend when I like."

Gerard caught at the chance of seeing these people, and of deciding whether Lady Jennings could have any serious complaint to make against them, or whether, as he thought more likely, she had merely made use of them as an excuse for breaking

the relationship with the young protégée who had offended her by her erratic ways.

The two young men went down the very next Sunday to the Priory, which proved to be a very much modernized old house, which the Americans had rented furnished from an English baronet.

It was a charming old place; and although these newly arrived rich people had brought down with them from town, and even across with them from New York, certain novelties necessary to their comfort, they had had discretion enough to avoid swamping the old with the new so that the house presented an appearance of refined comfort and luxury most attractive to the eye.

The family consisted of five persons, and the first thing that Gerard, who had grown keen in observation of late, noted about them was that they all represented different types in form and feature.

Delia, the eldest girl, was what Arthur Aldington irreverently called the nut-cracker type, and was a showy, tall woman, some thirty years of age, vivacious, talkative, and amusing.

Cora, the younger girl, was much shorter, and was a dainty, pale girl of twenty-five, who dressed with studied simplicity, and sang with great charm and sweetness. Indeed, her voice was one of the family assets, and being well trained, had been one of the most valuable aids in the family rise to the enviable position they already occupied in English society.

The mother was a dry, quiet American woman, very shy and watchful, as if not quite sure of herself among her motley brood.

The rest of the family consisted of two old-young men, whose age seemed to be greater than would have been expected in the brothers of the girls, but who were supposed to be sons by a former wife of the head of the family, Mr. Van Santen, who was shortly expected from America.

Neither was like the sisters; the one being withered and bent, with long teeth and a curious hard smile, while the younger of the two was a tall, rather good-looking man with a little fair mustache which he appeared to have only recently grown, a deep voice and a genial and almost homely manner.

The group was an interesting one, yet there was something about this household which Gerard did not like — a strange, unwholesome atmosphere.

The afternoon was not far advanced when two parties were formed for bridge playing, and a third for poker. Gerard did not play, but he kept his eyes open while the play went on, and listened, entranced, when Cora sang for the guests.

Her beautiful voice, indeed distracted some of the card-players, although they were in two of the suite of drawing-rooms opening on the terrace, and she was in the third.

Gerard thought he had never heard any voice so sweet as that of this pale girl with the washed-out

blue eyes, and the soft, colorless hair brushed straight back in a high full roll from her forehead. As he stood at the piano, while her mother played her accompaniments, he thought, looking at her slender figure, with her hands clasped behind her and her plain white muslin dress falling in full folds round her, without any other ornament than a wide white satin sash, that she made a most charming picture against the background of old tapestry which was one of the attractions of the music-room.

He was still listening enraptured to her singing of an old ballad which he had never admired before, when Arthur Aldington and another young fellow who had been playing cards all the afternoon came to join him on the terrace.

"I'm cleaned out," said Arthur. "This singing is beautiful but it doesn't go well with card-playing. I'm not the only man who has quite lost his head between the two. Card-playing for high stakes and lovely music don't go well together."

Gerard listened with attention. The very same idea had entered his own head some time ago, and he wondered how any of the men could keep their attention sufficiently fixed on the cards to play either poker or bridge within hearing of Miss Cora Van Santen.

"That's just what I should have thought," said he.

"Of course her two brothers, who are used to the

music can keep their heads," went on Arthur, who rather resented the inroads which the afternoon's play had made in his allowance; "so they made money, while we lost it."

Innocently as this was said, the speech struck an unpleasant note in the mind of Gerard, who had grown much more suspicious of late than he was by nature inclined to be. He was pondering the words, when presently he heard Arthur's voice, behind him, saying with surprise and delight —

"What, you here! I am pleased to meet you. Are you staying here, then?"

"Yes, I'm staying here," answered a voice which Gerard recognized.

And, in vague horror, he turned to find that this guest at the house of the Van Santens was no other than Rachel Davison. There was a mutual look of alarm in the eyes of the girl and Gerard as he turned sharply and found himself face to face with her.

CHAPTER XIII

The Priory gardens were looking lovely under the rays of the hot sun of the fading August afternoon; but the harmonious tints of tree and lawn, of bank and blossom, faded into an indistinct mass before the eyes of Gerard Buckland as he turned away from Rachel Davison, after a low-voiced greeting which he uttered mechanically, without knowing what he said.

If she had been unmoved at the meeting, or if her manner and look had been different, he would not have been so much perturbed as he was. But it was not merely that she looked infinitely surprised, startled, and alarmed at the sight of him, but that there was in her face an expression which seemed to bear only one possible interpretation: she looked guilty.

Try as he would to forget the impression her face made upon him at that first moment of astonishment at the meeting, he could not banish the disagreeable impression.

She had turned at once from him, after the first words of greeting, to speak again to Arthur Aldington, and to make inquiries after the rest of his family.

But Gerard saw in this rapid turning away from himself only another proof of guilty consciousness on her part that he was there and that he was watching her.

He turned away into the gardens, leaving the terrace and going down towards the broad fish-pond, which lay in a hollow at the end of a series of velvety lawns broken up by flower beds which were a mass of tall, handsome, flowering plants.

The gardens were one of the sights of the county, and even in the state of uneasiness and anxiety from which he was suffering, Gerard was conscious of their beauty.

So, too, were other people. For wandering about among the high hedges of yew and over the soft lawns, he found a dozen groups of two and three persons, enjoying the warm summer air, and gathering under the shade of the lime trees where Mrs. Van Santen was pouring out tea.

The lady threw at Gerard the apprehensive glance with which she greeted everyone who approached her whom she did not know well. He looked at her narrowly, but there was nothing in the least suspicious about her; she was a plain-featured, motherly woman who gave the impression of being more used to a simple, homely style of life than to the state which now surrounded her; and the gentleness with which she evidently tried to live up to the new life prepossessed him in her favor.

She smiled at him rather shyly, and invited him to take a seat beside her.

"I'm new to this," she said, with a strong American accent, as she poured him out a cup of tea; "to all this company, I mean. I'm used to a quieter sort of life altogether; and your smart British society folks make me shiver some!"

"Well, I hope you won't look upon me as belonging to the people who make you shiver," said Gerard, much taken with her gentle looks and her homely form of speech. "So you don't like us, Mrs. Van Santen, so much as your friends on the other side of the Atlantic?"

"I don't say that," replied Mrs. Van Santen, in the slow drawl which Gerard found rather attractive. "I've no doubt many of the people who frighten me because I'm not used to them only need to be better known. But it's just this, Mr. Buckland, when you've been used to a quiet, homely kind of life, and you get suddenly plunged into a livelier sort, why, it takes you time for you to feel your feet, you know!"

"Of course it does. But why should you be forced to lead anything but the kind of life you like, and you're used to?"

"Well, it's like this," said the good lady confidentially; "you Britishers think a mighty deal more of the dollars than folks do over on the other side!"

"What!" cried Gerard in amazement. "We always think it's the other way about!"

She shook her head shrewdly, and brushed back the braids of her grayish hair, which she wore parted in the middle and done in a severely plain knot behind.

"I never knew the value of money," she said emphatically, "till I came over here. Where we come from there are many who have money, and nobody thinks much of us; but over here we find friends among the smart people, and yet there's nothing to make us stand out from other folks!"

"I think there is, by what I hear — and what I see," added Gerard courteously. "Your younger daughter, Miss Cora, has a voice that we very rarely hear except on a professional platform, and everyone says you give entertainments which are unique."

She laughed.

"I don't see anything so special about them," she said simply, "except that perhaps we're not so stiff as you English people. But I should have thought that was against us, instead of being in our favor!"

He laughed.

"There's a great deal of pretense and what we call cant about us English," admitted Gerard. "We have bound ourselves by very rigid rules; but we like to escape from them sometimes, and we do it by going abroad, or by visiting people of wider notions than our own."

"Oh, that's it, is it? Well, I daresay, you're about right. But it's puzzling too, to see how your great ladies and your smart men come to see us, when on our own side we're not thought much of."

It was impossible not to like this simple homely creature, with her lasting wonder at the ease with which she and her family had established themselves in London society, and the freedom with which they had been "taken up."

Gerard found it less surprising than she did. The very mixture of simplicity and homeliness, as represented by the gentle middle-aged woman who disdained the aid of much extravagance in dress, and frankly spoke her mind about herself and her family, with the grace and accomplishments of the daughters, and the devotion to cards of the sons, formed a combination new and attractive to people who were tired of more commonplace households.

And the cleverness with which the Van Santens had chosen to locate themselves in one of the prettiest places near London, and the taste with which they had respected the beauties in which they found themselves, all combined to make the Priory the most popular resort of the moment with a considerable portion of the great world.

A few belated stayers in London, who found a delightful Sunday resort in the Priory, and a great many people staying in the country houses and river villas came over each week-end in their motor-cars

to spend a few hours in the merry atmosphere, unburdened with Sabbatarian restrictions, of the lively Americans.

While he was still sipping tea and chatting with Mrs. Van Santen, the sight of Rachel Davison, coming slowly from the house, accompanied on one side by the younger and better-looking of the two male Van Santens, made Gerard frown with displeasure.

Miss Davison was exquisitely dressed, as usual, and looked exceedingly handsome in a gown of black lace with a long train and lines of jet upon it, finished with enormous jet tassels. A large number of tassels, similar in design, but of smaller size, dangled from her bodice; and from underneath the short, full black sleeves and up to the throat from the slightly open black bodice, an underbodice and sleeves, very full and of creamy white transparent material, peeped out, finishing the costume with a relieving touch.

Her dark hair, coiled high and fastened by amber and jet combs and pins, set off the delicate pallor of her face.

Gerard, who had never conquered the jealousy with which he looked upon any other man who seemed to attract any of her attention, frowned when he noted the evident admiration of the younger Van Santen, who was tall, broad-shouldered, and good-looking.

Perhaps it was because he hated the sight of a good-looking man near Miss Davison that Gerard

took an instinctive and strong dislike to this Denver Van Santen, and told himself that the fellow was ill-mannered, presumptuous, and "bad-form" altogether.

On the other side of Miss Davison was an Englishman, a young baronet, who was already making himself conspicuous by the rapidity with which he was dissipating the fortune which he had recently inherited with the title.

Gerard, uneasily glancing from the one to the other, and from these three to the groups of gay visitors who were laughing and talking around them, wondered what sort of position the rest of the guests held, and whether there were many present of the type represented by the spendthrift young baronet.

There were two or three racing ladies, women of birth and position, whose rank enabled them to go fearlessly wherever they fancied, without calling down upon themselves the decree of banishment which lesser mortals can only avoid by extreme discretion.

Gerard wondered whether the ladies he saw were all of that venturesome type, and whether it was considered rather a daring thing to visit these bridge-playing Americans in the snug retreat they had chosen for themselves.

Meanwhile Miss Davison had been brought to the group under the lime trees, and placed in a comfortable chair, and waited upon assiduously by the

two young men who had accompanied her from the house.

Sir William Gurdon, the young baronet, was complaining of his ill-luck at poker. Denver Van Santen laughed at him.

"Wants a cool head — poker," he remarked; "and to keep your mind on what you're doing. That Cora and her singing were enough to distract anybody. We'll get farther away from the music this evening, if we play any more."

"Yes," assented Sir William. "I should awfully like to play again, but I don't want to make such a duffer of myself as I did this afternoon."

"I don't think you're cut out for a poker-player. If I were you I should give it up," said Denver, in a decided tone.

Sir William resented this as an imputation that he was not cool-headed.

"I don't know why you should say that," he said rather sharply. "I suppose poker has to be learned like everything else, and probably you play it better now than when you first began."

Denver shook his head modestly.

"Not always," he said; "sometimes I'm an arrant duffer at it. Why the other day I was cleaned out, absolutely cleaned out, by a fellow who hadn't played half a dozen times in his life. I *did* feel a fool, I can tell you!"

"You shall try again with me this evening," said

the baronet. "I'm not going to be beaten without a struggle, at that or at anything else."

Denver, however, tried to dissuade him.

"You'll only get licked," he said simply. "Whatever sort of a player you may make some day, and if you go on trying I suppose you will do all right in time, you're not strong enough to play with old hands like me and the two others who were with us to-day."

Mrs. Van Santen shrugged her shoulders.

"It's an almighty shame to play cards all Sunday!" she said, in her homely way. "I wonder you're not ashamed of yourself, Denver, to start it!"

"Well, so I am, perhaps," said he good-humoredly; "but I love cards, and if anyone else wants to play, I'm ready to take him on, you bet!"

Miss Davison, seated near Mrs. Van Santen, was sipping tea and nibbling bread and butter. Gerard, when the other two young men grew warm in discussion of poker and moved away a little, took the seat beside her.

"Different this, from the way the Aldingtons spend their Sunday!" said he, in a low voice as soon as their hostess had turned to talk to someone else.

"Yes," said Rachel. "It's rather shocking — till you get used to it."

"I think it would always seem shocking to me,"

said Gerard. "I don't think I have any strong Sabbatarian instincts, but I suppose the old Puritan survives ir us English, for I must confess that to see cards played all day on Sunday grates upon me; and I should have thought," he added quickly, in a lower voice, "that it would have grated on you too."

This home-thrust made her blush.

"One has to make allowance," she said, "for other people's ways. It's quite true, as you say, that one's Puritan instincts revolt from the continual card-playing; but I suppose that very strict people would say it's just as wrong to amuse oneself as one does at the Aldingtons', with music and conversation."

"I don't see how there could be the same objection to that."

"It's only a question of degree."

"So that you really wouldn't mind if we all, at the Aldingtons', were to sit down to poker and baccarat, instead of spending the Sundays there as we do?"

She turned to him quickly.

"I really don't see that we are called upon to decide those questions," she said. "Each one must lay down his own laws of conduct. As a matter of fact, it's a sentiment, and not any law, human or divine, that guides us in the matter, isn't it? You can't pretend that card-playing comes under the head of work, can you?"

Stung by what he took to be her indifference, Gerard made a very indiscreet speech.

"Work! I'm not so sure of that," said he.

Miss Davison turned to him quickly.

"Pray, what do you mean?" she asked sharply.

But he did not venture to say more. Indeed, he felt that he had nothing to say. He could not well have defined the secret instinct which made him vaguely suspect that there was something wrong about the play, just because Miss Davison was in the house at the time.

He certainly would not have liked to avow that that was his reason for his faint suspicions. But that it was because Rachel, who had been concerned none the less he knew, at the bottom of his heart, in other dubious transactions, was present at the Priory, that he suspected, on hearing that Arthur Aldington had lost his money, that all was not as fair as it looked in the play.

He stammered and would have changed the subject; but she would not let him.

"Surely you don't imagine," she said, "that you would meet Lady Sylvia and the Marchioness at houses where there was anything wrong! I'm afraid, Mr. Buckland, you let your Puritanism carry you a great deal too far."

She spoke with so much emphasis that he felt ashamed of what he had said, the more so that he really had no grounds for supposing that the two

wealthy young Americans would do anything that was not fair. Indeed, he had himself heard one of them trying to persuade a silly fellow not to play poker any more.

"Well," he said, in a shame-faced manner, "I admit that there's something so distasteful to me in seeing men win money under their own roof, that I said what I had no right to say."

"I'm glad you admit so much," said Rachel with dignity. "It is not a very nice suggestion to make that my friends, the people in whose house I am staying, are other than honorable."

Remembering what he was forced to suspect concerning her, Gerard could not help casting at her a quick glance, at which she blushed again.

She knew very well that he suspected her of complicity in other risky adventures, and she had no right to challenge him.

"Well," said he, "I suppose I ought to apologize, but I confess that if I am forced to play cards here, and one feels awkward at refusing always, when one is asked, I shall feel very despondent at having to pit myself against such a lot of good players."

A change came over Rachel's face. For a moment she sat silent, but then she rose from her chair, and with a glance which invited him to follow her, sauntered away to a flower-border, where she stopped, as if to admire the mass of gorgeous blossom in front of her.

He looked at her, as she stood, a beautiful and even queenly figure, in her glittering black dress against the green of the foliage and the rich coloring of the flowers; and if she had turned at that moment she would almost have been able to read in Gerard's face the feeling at his heart, the passionate wistful longing to know the truth, the whole truth about her, to learn, for good or ill, the secret which he knew was gnawing at her heart, to be able to tell, once for all, whether the woman who attracted him in spite of his knowledge, in spite of his judgment, was worthy or unworthy of an honest man's love.

CHAPTER XIV

He was quite near to her before she spoke, and then she did so without looking up. In an off-hand tone, she said —

"I shouldn't have expected you to play cards, after what you've said."

"Really! What have I said to imply that I should never, in any circumstances, play cards?"

She made an impatient gesture.

"Oh, you are trifling," she said. "I meant that, after all you've said about Sunday, and about these people playing so well, it would be inconsistent on your part to play here to-day."

"I may be obliged to. One doesn't like to stand out when everybody else is playing," said Gerard. And, with an uneasy feeling that he was going to have some hint given him, he drew her out. "I happen to have some money with me. I can't say I could afford very well to loose all of it, but after all, at poker, and these gambling games, it isn't always the old hands that win."

She spoke with vivacity.

"You would be very foolish to expect to win, pitted against men like these two idle Van Santens, who care more for cards than for anything else."

"Do you mean that you advise me not to?"

"Certainly I do. Just as I should advise any man not to try his rawness against the skill of practiced players at cards or at anything else."

"Do they always play for such high stakes?" asked Gerard abruptly.

"Of course. They're rich men, and there's no excitement for them unless the stakes are high. And I may tell you that, rich as they are, they like winning as much as any poor man could do."

Gerard looked at her steadily.

"May I say what I think, Miss Davison?" he asked, after a short pause.

"Not if it's anything disagreeable," she said quickly. "I've heard too many unpleasant speeches from you, Mr. Buckland, and for the future I command you to keep silence with me unless you have something to say which I shall be pleased to hear."

She tried to speak flippantly, but there was an underlying seriousness, nay, distress, in her look and tone, which told him that she was no happier than she had been when he last met her.

"I'm going to say what I had in my mind, all the same," he said, in a voice full of deep feeling. "It's only this: I'm sorry to see you here, Miss Davison. It's a change for the worse from Lady Jennings' house, and I'm sure you must feel it so. Why did you quarrel with her?"

She was deadly pale, but she tried to hold her own and to carry matters with a high hand.

"Don't you think," she said, "that you're rather indiscreet, Mr. Buckland, to presume to lecture me upon my actions? If I find that I am uncomfortable in the house of one friend, surely it is my own affair if I try another? And pray what fault have you to find with Mrs. Van Santen? Isn't she a dear old lady, quite as kind in her way as Lady Jennings?"

Gerard frowned in perplexity.

"Oh, I suppose so," said he. "Still, the whole atmosphere is different, the tone is lower; and what you gain in liveliness and gayety — and I suppose you do gain there — is, in my opinion, more than made up for by what you lose in refinement. There — I've offended you deeply, I know; but I don't care. It had to be said; and I shall never be satisfied until I see you back again at the little house where you seemed to be at home."

She turned upon him again, in the old way, ready with some haughty speech expressive of her annoyance at his presumption; but, as she did so, she met his eyes. And, just as it had happened before, it happened again; she caught her breath; she could not go on; and with her eyes full of sudden tears, and head which bent over the flowers as if to hide her face, she remained silent, while he stood also mute, excited, moved, longing wistfully to make her

speak out and tell him the truth that was troubling her.

But this *tête-à-tête* was not allowed to last long.

Gerard, jealous himself, had been quick to notice in the looks of the younger and handsomer Van Santen the keen admiration of Miss Davison's beauty and grace, which seemed but a natural tribute to her charms.

Denver came up at a sauntering pace, and with a glance at Gerard, which was by no means one of pure benevolence, asked —

"Are you two old friends now? Is Mr. Buckland a long-standing acquaintance of yours, Miss Davison?"

"I've known him a year, haven't I, Mr. Buckland? Isn't is about a year since I first met you at the Aldingtons'?"

"It's getting on that way now. It was in October."

"Well, don't treat him as if he was such an old friend that you haven't any eyes for newer ones, Miss Davison," pleaded Denver, in that bluff way which gave him an air of great honesty and good nature, but which struck Gerard, at that moment, as being merely rude and ill-mannered. "Miss Davison, I want you to come in and look over my shoulder — to bring me luck," he said.

"Hadn't you luck enough to please you this afternoon?" asked Gerard, more dryly than was quite

civil. "You seemed to have things all your own way with Aldington and Gurdon, and the others!"

Denver, instead of being offended, burst into a hearty laugh.

"Did I?" said he. "Well then, come now, you shall take revenge upon me for all the rest of 'em? Will that do?"

Miss Davison came up to them laughing lightly.

"Oh, no, Mr. Denver," she said, "you mustn't make Mr. Buckland play cards on Sunday. It's against his principles, I know. He's told me so."

Denver Van Santen thrust his hands into his pockets, and turned to Gerard with a jolly look of incredulous amazement.

"Oh, come now, I can't quite believe that," he said. "You don't mean that in this old country there are still left people, sensible people, who care a fig what day it is on which they have a good time?"

"I don't know that cards are my idea of a good time," said Gerard quietly. "I'm not fond of them, and I've only played poker once, and that a long time ago."

"Won't you try your luck now?"

"I think not to-day," said Gerard. "Aldington and I have to be getting back to town."

"Oh, no. You'll stay to dinner, won't you? Aldington's going to."

Gerard tried to get hold of Arthur, to persuade him to leave the Priory without delay. But his

friend had been too much attracted by Cora Van Santen to be able to tear himself away so soon, and they found themselves forced to stay to dinner, which was fixed on Sunday at the early hour of half-past six, in order to leave more time for card-playing afterwards, as Gerard discovered.

When the guests who had stayed to dinner, who numbered some eight or nine, retired to the drawing-rooms afterwards, they found there some half-dozen new arrivals, who had dropped in for the evening. When Gerard entered the music-room, after dinner, where he hoped to be allowed to remain, in order to escape the card-playing, he caught sight of a figure which he thought was familiar, but which he could not immediately identify.

It was that of a tall, broad-shouldered young man, dressed, like most of the others, in dinner coat of the usual type. He stood a little apart, as if not quite at home among the others, and Gerard looked at him two or three times, without being able to recollect where he had seen him before. He was a rather silly-looking man with gentle dark eyes, an insignificant nose, and a black mustache, and he seemed, from the little which Gerard heard him say, to be as dull and commonplace a fellow as ever made one of the background figures at any social gathering.

He talked about the weather, and uttered those important remarks shyly, as if ashamed of the sound

of his own voice; altogether a very dull and uninteresting person he seemed to be.

Gerard overheard Sir William Gurdon asking one of the Van Santens who he was.

"Well, I believe his name is Jones, and that's about all I know about him, except that he's been here three times, and hasn't opened his mouth more than twice," replied Denver, with a laugh. "A regular type of your bullet-headed, stolid Englishman, I call him."

"We're not all so dull as he appears to be," retorted Sir William, as he turned away.

Mr. Jones was so shy that Mrs. Van Santen took compassion on him, and introduced him to one or two of the ladies, and in particular to Rachel Davison, to whom she whispered —

"Your poor compatriot is so frightened that you'd be doing him a kindness if you'd say something to him. Tell him it's some time since we Americans were cannibals; but for that matter, if we were still, I think *he'd* be quite safe."

And the good creature led the shy young man up to Miss Rachel, and said —

"Mr. Cecil Jones — Miss Davison."

Rachel smiled and spoke kindly to the poor fellow, and tried to put him at his ease.

But Gerard was looking at the two spellbound. For Mr. Jones had had to turn his back to him in

order to make his bow to the lady to whom he was thus presented. And Gerard, scarcely believing his eyes, stared at him from this new point of view, and felt more and more convinced that, though he had not recognized the dull, sheepish face, he knew the back view of Mr. Cecil Jones; and that he was no other than the young man who had beckoned Miss Davison out of the tea-shop, and who had accompanied her to and from the police-station, on the day of the shop-lifting incident at the stores.

Gerard felt stupefied.

What was going to happen? What were these two here for, pretending to be strangers to each other, and talking with the air of forced animation with which people do when they have been newly introduced?

Gerard watched them furtively, and noted other strange things.

It was not long after dinner when the card-playing began again, but Mr. Jones excused himself by saying that he really scarcely knew one card from another. There was much amusement at this, and Denver insisted that if he knew nothing about cards he must learn, and made him choose whether he would begin with baccarat, poker, or bridge.

"Really," protested the blushing young man, "it doesn't much matter what I begin with, as I tell you I know nothing about any one of them."

However, they would take no denial, and the un-

happy young man was thrust into a seat, forced to take the cards into his hands, and exhibited such dense ignorance of even the way to hold his cards that the Van Santens were secretly in fits of laughter at his expense, which they found it hard to hide.

He obstructed the game by his foolish questions, betrayed his helplessness and incompetency at every move, and grew quite angry at his own ill-luck.

"I'd always heard," he protested ruefully, when he had lost a couple of sovereigns, the stakes having been lowered in deference to his incapacity, "that beginners generally win. I don't seem to, though."

"You're not venturesome enough," said Miss Davison encouragingly. "You should play with a little more daring. Don't be timid."

"Why don't you take a hand yourself, to give him courage?" suggested Denver.

"Not at poker. I don't understand it," said she.

"Well, at anything you like. What do you know? Baccarat? Nap? I don't care what it is as long as it's cards," said Denver.

Miss Davison consented to sit down and make one at nap, and, to Gerard's uneasiness, she won as much as the Van Santens did. But still Cecil Jones lost steadily, until he declared that he had no more money to play with.

Miss Davison seemed quite delighted at her own luck, and gathered up her winnings in triumph.

The others congratulated her, and Gerard watched

her as she sailed out of the room and on to the terrace, with her winnings in her hands to show to Delia Van Santen.

Delia was the center of a lively group who were sitting on the terrace in the evening air, laughing and talking and enjoying themselves more innocently than the gamblers within.

Cora and Arthur Aldington were sitting apart on the stone balustrade, and Gerard could see that the young man was getting every moment more deeply in love with the graceful songstress.

Miss Davison ran up to Mrs. Van Santen and showed her winnings with delight; but the old lady was not pleased.

"Dear me," she said, "I don't know what you young folks want with so much money, that you must needs gamble to get it! I should have thought it was much pleasanter to spend the evening in this beautiful air than in those hot rooms! And you, Miss Davison! I'm surprised at you. I was looking to you to win Denver from his gaming ways! He thinks so much of you, and admires you so much! And now you're encouraging him in it!"

The old lady had talked herself out of breath, while Rachel only laughed and put her winnings in her purse.

"I'll cure him," she said, "by winning all his money and leaving him without any! Won't that do, Mrs. Van Santen?"

And she laughed archly at the gentle old lady, who shook her head and told her she was every bit as bad as the boys.

Meanwhile the play went on, sometimes at one game, and sometimes at another; and the luck varied a little, but only a little.

Denver Van Santen warned all those who wanted to play poker with him that they had better not unless they wanted to lose their money.

"I'll back myself," he said quite frankly, "to play poker against anybody. Against anybody — I don't care who it is."

And truly enough, although at other games the luck varied a good deal, it was hopeless to try to get the better of Denver at his favorite game.

Harry Van Santen, who was a plain, wrinkled man, with long teeth and a cold, funless smile, played bridge well, and won for the most part; but his luck was subject to variations, and when he reckoned up his fortune at the end of the play, he avowed himself a loser by two pounds ten.

But Denver pursued a boastful and victorious course, which remained uncheckered to the end. He was perfectly candid and honest about his winnings, reckoned them up openly, and found that he had made twenty-six pounds during the day. But he was so swaggeringly triumphant, so carelessly sure of always retaining the luck he had had that day, that he irritated some of the men, and got two or

three promises, among them one from Sir William Gurdon, that he should not be allowed to win always. They would come another day and get their own back.

But Denver, laughing with great good humor, defied them all.

They might come and play with him whenever they liked, but they would get a licking, he said. He flattered himself he knew what he was talking about. And while he admitted that he was weak in geography, history, and the use of the globes, he was ready to bet his bottom dollar that he would hold his own at his own favorite game till the end of the chapter.

He grew excited and challenged them to bring to the Priory any British poker-player alive, and he would show him a thing or two he, the Britisher, didn't know.

And so, good humored to the end, but secure and confident in his victories, Denver saw the guests off, and stood at the Priory door waving his hand to the men whom he had made the victims of his skill.

Gerard and Arthur were among the last to leave, Arthur being unable to tear himself away from Cora's side, and Gerard being very anxious, as he always was, for just a last word with Miss Davison.

When he got his opportunity, Gerard asked abruptly —

"Why did you pretend you'd never seen Mr. Jones before this evening?"

Miss Davison opened wide eyes of surprise.

"Really, Mr. Buckland, it's very hard to have to say so, but don't you think you are going a little too far? I don't know what you mean."

"You have met Mr. Cecil Jones before, but this evening you treated him as if he had been a complete stranger."

A light came into her eyes.

"Oh, I know whom you take him for," she said quickly. "The man you saw me with that day — the day when something happened at the stores."

"Yes, yes," cried he, surprised at her sudden touch of candor.

She smiled demurely.

"But that man," she said, with a smile of irritating superior knowledge, "was not Mr. Jones at all. I swear it."

"You swear!" faltered Gerard.

"Yes; I'm not at liberty to tell you that man's name, but — it is not Cecil Jones."

Gerard fell back, bewildered and wounded. He could not bear to face fresh proofs of her duplicity. But was he mistaken? Or was she forsworn?

CHAPTER XV

The last impression left upon Gerard Buckland's mind as he went down the drive with Arthur Aldington after they had taken leave of the American family at the Priory, was that of a party of good-humored, unpretending, easy-mannered people, anxious to enjoy life and to make those around them enjoy it also.

The group on the door step of the old Elizabethan mansion, as seen partly in the moonlight and partly in the electric light which streamed through the open door of the house, was a striking and a charming one.

In the foreground stood the two brothers, Harry, tall, thin, solemn, and perhaps rather unprepossessing but not at all behind the rest of the family in the warmth of his invitation to the departing guests to come again.

Denver, the younger, broad-shouldered, deep-voiced, the embodiment of good humor, perhaps rather addicted to his national vice of boastfulness, but on the whole too unaffected and straightforward in manner to be other than pleasing.

Mrs. Van Santen, the picture of gentle good na-

ture and simplicity, was just behind her sons, with a hand on the shoulder of the younger, who stood on the step below her. Her gentle voice could be heard but faintly as she wished her guests good-bye; but the gracious, homely figure was good to look upon, forming as it did a strong amusing contrast to the elegance of her daughters, and to the luxury of the house in which they lived.

The daughters were, perhaps, the figures that remained the longest in the minds of the departing guests. After the manner of young American women, they were so amusing, so vivacious, and withal so quiet in their manners, making their mark rather by quickness of intellect than by loudness of voice, that it was impossible to think of them without recalling the pleasure their accomplishments and graces had given.

Delia, the elder, was the perfection of grace, and wore her plainly made but well-chosen clothes with a distinction which a princess might have envied. Without being very handsome, she was so lively, so full of repartee and resource in argument, and so active and alert in passing from group to group among her mother's guests, assuring herself that all were enjoying themselves, and that they were in congenial society, that she might have been called the leading spirit of the family, and was undoubtedly the pivot on which their social scheme turned.

She it was who knew when to take a guest, sore

over his losses at poker, into the garden to enjoy conversation under the trees in the soothing society of the old lady, or into the music-room to be coaxed back into good humor by the sweet singing of her sister Cora.

As for Cora, her musical gifts never failed to evoke the remark that it was a pity she was not a professional singer, for such rare sweetness of voice as she possessed ought to have been given to a wider circle than any amateur can appeal to.

But when anyone said this, the brothers would look rather offended, and would say shortly that it might have been all very well for Cora if she had been poor, to earn her living on the concert platform, but that they could never think of allowing their sister, who had and would always have, every luxury she could wish for provided for her, to appear in public. If her voice was charming, let her use it for the pleasure of her friends.

Personally, then, Gerard had no fault to find with any of the family. He might like some members of it better than the others, he might disapprove of the tastes and habits which seemed to him to indicate both want of consideration for their visitors and lack of those qualities which make men lifelong friends. To spend so many hours at cards was revolting to the young Englishman, and his principles and prejudices alike made the spending of Sunday in this manner distasteful to him.

But this alone would have roused in him no suspicion that there was anything wrong about these hospitable strangers. Many an English household that he knew of spent Sunday in much the same way, and incurred no suspicion of there being anything worse than a tendency to dissipation on the part of its members.

Racing ladies like Lady Sylvia and the Marchioness were known to play bridge on most days, and yet they were not "cut" by their acquaintances and friends.

It was the fact that he had met Rachel Davison at the Priory which filled Gerard with disquietude. For, whatever might be the truth about her, it was undeniable that he had so far never failed to find her connected in some more or less close way with things that had been better undone.

The incident in the crowd on the night of the ball; the affair at the stores; her deceit towards her mother and Lady Jennings; all these things combined to make it impossible to see in this fresh phase of Rachel's existence anything but some new form of trickery or ugly mystery.

To have seen her sit down to play cards with these Americans, therefore, would alone have made him curious concerning them; but, coupled with the fact that both she and the Van Santens had pretended not to know the man Jones, her playing became at once

suggestive to Gerard's unwilling mind of something being wrong with the play.

What he would have passed without remark at any other time, therefore, now became a source of disturbance and uneasiness to him; and instead of taking for granted that Denver's estimate of his gains that day was correct, he made a little sum for himself, based on what he had heard, in answer to his inquiries, concerning the luck of the rest of the card-players.

And the result of his calculations was to find that, instead of Denver's having won twenty-six pounds, which was his own rough estimate of his winnings, he must have netted at least two hundred pounds.

From this calculation it was easy to go on to others; and to say that, if Denver played poker once a week only, and if he were always as lucky and as skillful as he had shown himself that day, then his annual income derived from the cards alone must be something approaching ten thousand pounds.

Of course he had no possible means of knowing whether Denver did play poker every Sunday; and whether he invariably won at it; but, taking the facts that he knew in conjunction with Miss Davison's presence, and with the singular fact that she and the others pretended not to know Jones, who was clearly acting as a decoy, it seemed to Gerard terribly difficult to get away from the conclusion that something

was wrong in the pleasant and hospitable household, and that Rachel Davison was mixed up in it.

And now she had deliberately told him a lie! He tried in vain to avoid coming to this conclusion, but in the face of her denial that Cecil Jones was identical with the man he had seen in her company more than once, he could not believe her. Although to-day was the first occasion on which he had seen the young man's face, Gerard had so carefully made a mental note of his figure and gait, that he was sure he could not be mistaken.

Arthur Aldington, who was his own chauffeur, was driving slowly and carefully down the drive when suddenly he stopped the motor-car, and looking out into the road towards which he was going, said —

"By Jove! There's a breakdown, and it's Sir William Gurdon's big car in difficulties, I believe."

Gerard jumped out and went down the drive to the gate, which had been left open.

Looking down the road he saw that Arthur was right: the big, handsome car which had brought the baronet over from his Thames-side villa was blocking the road, and beside it were three persons: Sir William, his chauffeur, and Cecil Jones, whom the baronet had offered to take back to town with him, which he could easily do, as he proposed to spend the night in the city himself.

Gerard went back to Arthur, told him he was

right, and jumping into the car again, turned and said —

"Sir William's got that fellow Jones with him."

Arthur had not yet started the car, and he said in a low voice —

"I don't like the look of Jones. He's such an awful ass! I don't want to have to take him with us."

"Oh, I don't suppose we shall have to do that. We don't know what's wrong. Something very trifling, perhaps."

Still Arthur hesitated. He was in a very ill humor, on account of his losses.

"I suppose it doesn't matter to him how much money he loses," he said, in a grumbling tone; "he looks that sort of chap, doesn't he?"

Gerard hesitated. He had in his mind the notion that Cecil Jones, simple as he looked and sillily as he spoke, was not quite the innocent jay he appeared. But yet he did not want to betray a suspicion of these new friends of Rachel Davison's until he was quite sure about them.

"Did he lose much?" asked Gerard, instead of replying to his friend's question.

"I don't quite know. I saw a good deal of gold flying about, and he said, with that sheepish smile of his, that he'd been cleaned out. I wonder Miss Davison cares to stay with people who play cards all day on Sunday!"

"Well, it surprised me to see her playing, too," admitted Gerard.

"Yes. I shan't say anything about that at home. Mother would be awfully disgusted. And I can't say I quite like it myself; and I know I don't like losing so much as I did."

"Why did you go on playing, then?"

"Oh, you know one can't help oneself. These people are rich, and they don't consider that other pockets are not all as deep as their own."

"Are they really so rich?"

"Oh, yes. Of course I know everybody in America is called a millionaire if he has a little money put by. But the father, old Van Santen, really is a very rich man, as I happen to know, and a man with a decent character, as rich men's characters go out there. He's expected over here every day, and I fancy he'll be rather surprised, if all I hear about his rather straight-laced views is correct, at the way in which his quiet family has transformed itself into a remarkably lively one. Denver says they've all been kept in with too tight a hand, and that now they have to make up for it."

"I don't quite understand that fellow," said Gerard. "He's not consistent. I heard him telling Sir William that he sometimes lost at poker to beginners at the game. But then, later, he was boasting that he could beat any poker-player in England."

"I don't believe," said Arthur viciously, "that he plays merely for the pleasure of the game, as he says. I believe he's trying to make a pile for himself, in case his father, when he turns up, should object to the way they've been going on, and cut off supplies."

This was a good suggestion, and Gerard muttered, "By Jove!"

"Of course I don't mean to suggest," went on Arthur hastily, "that there's anything fishy about his play. Only that he isn't indifferent to what he makes by it."

"I think that too," assented Gerard.

"But pray don't say I made any suggestion of the sort," added Arthur. "I shouldn't like the girls to hear that I had said anything they wouldn't like to hear about their brother. And indeed I don't know that I have any right to say what I did to you; but I'm rather sore at having been fool enough to lose more money than I can afford."

"Of course," suggested Gerard tentatively, "if you suspect the one you must suspect the rest, and surely you don't think the ladies —"

Arthur interrupted quite fiercely.

"I don't suspect anybody. I never said such a thing," he said irritably. "Of course it's all right. But what I meant was that I don't like American men and their ways and habits and tastes, so well as I like the feminine part of the nation. The daughters

are charming, perfectly charming, and the old lady is quite a treat in her refreshing innocence. The sight of that quaint New England — it is New England, isn't it, that the quaint old figures come from? — New England figure among all those smart young modern men and women, is something one can't forget."

"You're quite right," said Gerard enthusiastically. "She's an old dear, with her skimpy little shawl, and what I'm sure she would call her best taffety petticoat."

The two young men laughed, and, as there was no sign of a forward movement in the big car, Arthur started his motor, and soon arrived at the spot where the group stood round the disabled machine.

"Hallo! A breakdown! Anything we can do?" asked Arthur, as he stopped and got down.

Sir William was not at all pleased at his mishap, and he answered rather shortly that there was nothing much the matter, and that if the small car were to go on, he would soon overtake it.

The artless-looking Cecil Jones was smoking a cigarette with the same placid smile on his face which had irritated Arthur Aldington at the card-table. He made weak suggestions as to the cause of the mishap, and was treated by the others as a person who did not count.

Gerard, however, who had reason to suspect that he was not quite so simple as he pretended to be,

went up to him, and, seizing a moment when the others were all bending down to look into the machinery of the disabled car, said —

"I think I've met you before, Mr. Jones, and I'm trying to remember where it was."

The young man turned, with his sheepish smile on his face.

"Have you?" he said. "I don't remember you. Where was it we met?"

Gerard felt irritated and angry. He knew that this man was either a swindler who was working with Miss Davison in the dubious paths he suspected, or else that he was a man who was desperately in love with her, and whom she had twisted round her little finger, so that he did what she told him to without question, if not without suspicion.

To judge by his silly face, this latter was the more likely supposition of the two.

Gerard tried to take him by surpris

"Was it outside Lord Chislehurst's house, on the night of the great ball he gave a year ago?" he asked sharply.

But there was no sign of confusion or intelligence on Cecil Jones' face.

"Lord Chislehurst's!" he echoed stupidly. "A year ago! I don't know where Lord Chislehurst's is. And I don't think I was in England a year ago."

Frustrated, Gerard decided to make a fresh attempt to take him by surprise.

"I daresay I'm wrong," he said. "I'm not very good at remembering faces. But you do remind me of a man I met a few days ago, coming out of a police-station."

The words could be taken as insulting, but Cecil Jones was impervious to insult.

"I don't think I've ever been in a police-station," he said simply.

"Not with Miss Davison?"

Cecil Jones turned round so that he could stare blankly into his questioner's face.

"Miss Davison!" echoed he. "Do you mean the lady I was introduced to to-night?"

"Yes," said Gerard shortly.

A broad stupid smile spread over the young man's plump face.

"Fancy thinking I should meet a smart lady like that in a police-station!" he said buoyantly. "It sounds like the game of consequences. 'Where they met'—'In a police-station.' 'What they were doing'—'Picking pockets!'"

And he burst into such a long and silly laugh that Gerard, irritated almost beyond endurance, did not dare to go on with his questions, for fear of drawing down upon them the attention of the others, who turned round to see what was the matter.

But Gerard was more convinced than ever that this innocent-looking young man was a person to be watched; and, resolved to see what became of him

that night, he found an opportunity of asking Sir William where he was going to set his companion down.

The baronet named a well-known sporting club.

Arthur Aldington was calling Gerard to get into his car, and in a few minutes they were on the road again.

Gerard had made his plans, and, as his friend had offered to take him back to his chambers in town, he could reckon upon being in time for what he wanted to do, if only the big car were delayed sufficiently to give the little one a good start.

Things turned out as he wished. He and Arthur got to town before Sir William; and Gerard went straight to the neighborhood of the club where Cecil Jones was to be set down, and was able to conceal himself in the entrance of a block of flats on the opposite side of the road.

Here he waited for nearly half an hour, afraid he had missed his man.

At last, however, he saw Sir William Gurdon's big motor-car coming up the street, and a few moments later it stopped at the door of the club, and Cecil Jones got out, shook hands with Sir William, and went into the building.

The motor-car drove away, and Gerard remained on the watch. Not for more than half an hour, for at the end of that time Cecil Jones came out of the club building, and hailing a hansom, got in and

drove off, giving a direction to the cabman which Gerard could not hear.

But he was far too much interested in what became of Jones to let the matter rest like that. So he hailed a hansom in his turn, told the driver to follow the vehicle before him, and continued the chase until Jones' hansom stopped in one of the streets off Charing Cross Road. Here Cecil Jones got out, paid the cabman, and disappeared from sight most mysteriously.

Although Gerard was watching keenly, he was unable to tell exactly at what point his quarry had disappeared. The street was rather dark at this point, and there was a court, as well as the openings into doorways, to be examined.

Cecil Jones' hansom drove away, and Gerard paid his own cabman and got down to continue his pursuit on foot, but in vain. Jones had disappeared as completely as if the earth had swallowed him up.

Gerard looked upon this circumstance as not merely suspicious, but as confirming his own belief that Jones, instead of being the innocent and mild-eyed victim of expert gamesters that he had pretended to be, was really a confederate of these Americans, if they were swindlers, or a swindler who intended, in the future, to make money out of the boastful Denver, and who began by posing as a harmless dupe or beginner, in order to take the American off his guard.

Gerard did not think the Van Santens were cheats; their father being a man of good repute, as well as of great wealth, it was scarcely likely, even if his sons had turned out loose-principled, that they would take to dubious courses which would endanger their position in society. The sons of such a woman as the gentle Mrs. Van Santen, too, were scarcely the sort of persons to be accused of deliberate fraud.

But that the younger made money by his card-playing, and that he boasted of the fact was obvious; and Gerard thought that such a man might very easily become the prey of a clever card-sharper, who might begin by passing himself off as a bungling novice, and end by making considerable sums out of the swaggering American.

This was the view he was most inclined to take. Not for one moment did he believe that the mild-eyed Jones was really a victim: he was confident that he had been with Miss Davison on the occasion of the shop-lifting, and he began now to ask himself whether he were not the very man to whom he had seen her handing the flashing ornament on the night of Lord Chislehurst's ball.

Perhaps they were both under the influence of the man in the white mustache. Or perhaps — but this he scarcely believed possible — Cecil Jones was no other than the military-looking man under a disguise.

As this last suggestion came into his mind, Gerard

tried to recall the voice of the white-haired man, whom he had heard utter a few words to Miss Davison before parting with her at the station.

But on that occasion it was Rachel who had spoken clearly enough to be heard, while the man had so subdued his voice that Gerard could just hear him speaking, without being able to make out what he said. Such a remembrance as he retained therefore of the sound of the elderly gentleman's voice Gerard could not rely upon as a help in his present difficulty.

One thing, and one thing only he was quite sure of, Cecil Jones, instead of being the dupe he pretended to be, was a swindler, and a very artful one. Nothing else would explain his conduct adequately. Only a swindler, or a man used to the arts of concealment, would have contrived so often to be seen without being well seen. Only a man who had something to conceal would have affected not to know Miss Davison, when, as a matter of fact, he must be on terms of old acquaintance with her. And only a very clever man could have succeeded so well in feigning absolute stupidity over the cards as he had done.

Last and most important thing of all, Gerard was convinced that, carefully as he had concealed himself while watching Jones, that astute person must have seen him and must have laid his plans well in order to throw his pursuer off the track.

Sick at heart, and not knowing whether he now

hated Miss Davison for her duplicity and her obvious association with undesirable persons, or whether he retained his old longing to believe in her in spite of everything, Gerard went back to his rooms.

He went to sleep that night upon a firm resolve to have no more to do with Rachel Davison if he could help it; not to put himself in her way again, and not to visit Lady Jennings until that lady had forgotten her late friend and protégée, and interested herself in someone else.

CHAPTER XVI

Gerard was very greatly assisted in this determination by the fact that he had received an invitation to spend the month of August and the beginning of September with his uncle in Norfolk. And although it cannot be said that he succeeded in forgetting Miss Davison while he was away, yet in the enjoyment of his holiday he was able to believe that he had cured himself of what he was ready to call his infatuation about a girl whom he could not but look upon as better forgotten.

Again and again he argued with himself, trying to find out some possible reason for her conduct compatible with her being as honorable and noble a woman as he had at first supposed.

But stern facts stood in the way on all sides, and he had reluctantly to come to the conclusion that the less he thought about her the better it would be for his peace of mind.

And then, after six weeks of pleasant country life, disturbed indeed now and then by recollections of Rachel, and vague longings to see her again and to probe the mysterious depths of her wayward nature, he returned to town, and straightway fell deeper into the toils than ever.

It happened in this way. Gerard was with a party of his country friends and relations at the Earl's Court Exhibition one evening, and had just finished dining with them at one of the restaurants, when, as he smoked a cigarette by himself outside, he caught sight of Rachel Davison and Denver Van Santen, walking slowly together. The young man was talking very earnestly, and bending down to look into her face, while Rachel, as far as Gerard could see, was listening to him without displeasure.

In an instant all his good resolutions, his wise resignation, disappeared. He was filled with the maddest jealousy of the handsome American; and no amount of philosophical sneers at women availed him when he looked at the girl who, after an absence of six weeks, seemed to him ten times handsomer than she had ever looked before.

Her black dress, of some clinging material, richly embroidered with black chenille and jet, had long sleeves and a vest of tucked chiffon of the palest pink; and her large black hat, trimmed with a cluster of black ostrich tips and with one pale pink rose under the brim, suited her handsome face to perfection.

A cape of some soft black material, lined with tucked pink chiffon, completed her costume, which, as usual with her, was carefully studied down to the well-cut, high-heeled black shoes and black silk stockings, and the glimpse of a pale pink underskirt

trimmed with chiffon of the same color that was shown as she held up her dress.

In vain Gerard told himself that he was glad to have seen her with Denver Van Santen, that now he could go his way with an easy mind, secure in the knowledge that Rachel Davison was merely a friend and accomplice of thieves, shop-lifters, and other undesirable persons, and that the very fact of her allowing herself to be made love to by this swaggering gamester proved conclusively how unfit she was to be loved by any honest man.

The fiercer he grew as he told himself these things, the more savagely he watched the two as they sauntered among the people, and at last joined a large group, among whom Gerard recognized the pale face and simple gray silk gown of Cora Van Santen, and the homely features of her mother, who, good soul, looked more out of place than ever, in her old-fashioned large bonnet and heavy dolman, among the crowds of well-dressed women around her.

As before at the Priory, the family was surrounded by smart English people, of whom Gerard recognized two or three. One was Sir William Gurdon, who was talking eagerly to Delia, and another was Arthur Aldington, who could not tear himself away from Cora.

Gerard watched them from a distance, but did not go near them.

He saw that Denver could not leave Rachel's side,

and that she, instead of resenting his persistent attentions, appeared to be encouraging him.

But the firmness with which he told himself that he was glad, and that now he could whistle her off and leave her to her undesirable friends, soon left him; and on the very first opportunity, when he saw Rachel for a moment on the outside of the crowd formed by the Americans and their friends, he pounced upon her, and suddenly presenting himself like a brigand rather than a casually met friend, said between his clenched teeth —

"I must speak to you. I will."

He expected to be snubbed, to be dismissed more or less coldly; but, to his surprise, Rachel turned very white, as she always did when excited, and then flushed a little, and said —

"Very well. We can come back to Mrs. Van Santen afterwards."

She walked away with him at a rapid pace, so that they were soon lost to the sight of her friends, and mingling in the general crowd.

The night was fine and warm, and the gardens were full. It was without the slightest difficulty that they got the opportunity Gerard wanted, of speaking to her from the depths of his heart.

"Why do you let that fellow talk to you? Do you care for him?" he asked, conscious as he spoke that he was using a tone which, considering all the circumstances, was as unjustifiable as it was absurd.

"I couldn't help his talking to me, Mr. Buckland. I was staying with his people before I went abroad with my mother, and I am visiting them again now."

"Do you care for him?"

"I like them all; and as for Mr. Denver, he wants me to marry him."

"To marry him! And you are going to?"

She hesitated.

"I haven't given him any answer yet."

"Of course I know I have no right to ask."

He was trembling, and trying hard to speak in a quiet and cool tone. He was conscious that, if his suspicions of her were well founded, there was nothing in the least extraordinary in her marrying the swaggering American, who, for that matter, was certainly what would have been called a good match, since he was the son of a rich man.

But the puzzle of the matter was that, knowing all that he knew, and suspecting all that he suspected, Gerard felt that she was too good to throw herself away upon this fellow, whom he believed to be guilty of winning money from his guests, at least by dint of superior skill with the cards, if not by something less creditable.

Away from her he might and did believe in the possibility of her complicity in crime; when in her presence he felt again that she was incapable of anything dishonorable or criminal.

Rachel drew a soft little sigh, which disarmed him completely. If he had thought her capable of deceit, of guilt a moment before, that sigh made him feel ashamed of such thoughts. He turned to her quickly. They were in a dark part of the gardens, where, standing beside her, with his face away from the light, he could speak at his ease.

"Rachel," he said, "I don't believe you care for this fellow; I don't believe you would marry him. Will you marry me?"

As had happened more than once before, the sudden betrayal of his tenderness softened and unnerved her.

"Oh, how can you ask me?" she burst out, in a hoarse whisper. "Thinking as you do of me, why do you do it? It's impossible that you can care for me, impossible that you mean what you say."

The words, as she uttered them, sent shock after shock through him. At one moment her heart-rending tones made him feel smitten with remorse for doubting her; the next, a sort of shame, of humiliation in her voice revived his worst fears. He stood silent beside her for a space, unable to reply.

A smothered sob from her loosened his tongue. Keeping quite still, so that a person might have passed close to them without noticing how vital was the subject of their conversation, how deeply moved they both were, he said —

"How do you know what I think? Isn't it enough

for you that I tell you I love you, that I ask you to be my wife? Rachel you are miserable. You go and stay with these people, but you don't care for them; you listen to this man, but you don't like him, you never could like him. Why do you pretend to? Don't tell me you mean to marry him: I know better. You don't love him, and you don't trust him: you can't. But you've sometimes spoken, to me and to others, as if you did care a little for me. Won't you give up this feverish, miserable life that you are leading? Won't you be my wife, and rest and forget it all? You won't make so much money as you are doing now. You won't be able for a time at any rate, to wear such beautiful dresses as you do now; but you would be happier. I'm not very poor, and I love you, in spite of myself, in spite of — everything. Will you give it all up, and give up these dubious American people, and learn to be happy? I could teach you, Rachel, you know I could."

She was moved, as she so easily was by his passionate attempts to solve the mystery of her life.

But she kept her self-control, and shook her head.

"Don't ask me," she said, in a tremulous whisper; "it's of no use. I can only say one thing: no, no, no."

"Why must you say that, if you feel that you would like to say something else, Rachel? Listen.

I know you are acting under orders. I know you are leading a life you hate, and that you are doing it because you are under the influence of a will stronger than your own. I know that you wish you could break away from it, that you would give the world to be free. And I know that something stronger than yourself holds you down and binds you, and forces you into ways that torture you, and into a life that is a living tomb for all that is best in you. Rachel, Rachel, tear yourself away from it — break loose; say you will be free, and with my help you will be."

His words had the most extraordinary effect upon the girl. At the first mention of the superior power that held her in bondage, a violent convulsion seemed to pass through her frame, and though she uttered no sound, he knew that the unexpected blow had struck home. Then she listened rigidly to the rest of his passionate speech, seeming to drink in his words with avidity, to find some painful, piteous pleasure in the expression of his belief, his entreaties. When he had let his voice die away and was waiting for her answer, she did not look at him, but he could hear her drawing her breath as if with difficulty, and he knew that she was going through a great, a pitiful struggle with herself.

He whispered again —

"Rachel, won't you do it? Won't you get free, and be my wife?"

Then she turned a startled face towards him in the half-darkness.

"I can't marry you, Mr. Buckland," she said tremulously. "I don't deny I'm gratified by the feeling you have for me, though I know I don't a bit deserve it. Believe me, you would be miserable if I were to listen to you: I can imagine nothing more terrible for you than to have a wife like me, with a capricious and headstrong temper, and a will that leads her into all sorts of ways which she would perhaps have done better to avoid. So I thank you, but I can only give you one answer."

He came a little nearer.

"Rachel," he said, "think again. Think it all over quietly — to-night — by yourself, and then answer me afterwards. Think whether you would not rather give up the life that makes you miserable, for the life which would make you happy. Don't answer me now; think it over first. Will you?"

She hesitated. This proud, headstrong girl was always easily moved as a child when once he touched the right chord, as he seemed to be able to do at will.

"Yes, yes, I will," she said, in a timid tone, like a very, very young girl confronted by a difficult choice; "but I'm afraid —"

"Don't be afraid of anything yet. Weigh what I've said against what others say, and decide which offers you the best chance of happiness."

There was a short silence, Rachel trembling and not looking at him, he watching her with tender, imploring eyes.

Suddenly there appeared between them the figure of Denver Van Santen, and Gerard started back a step with a shock.

"Why, my dear girl," said the swaggering American, "I didn't know what had become of you. Did you mean to give me the slip?"

As he spoke, he offered her his arm with an air of confident devotion which nettled Gerard immensely.

And without so much as a glance at the timid, passionate English lover, whose look and attitude were eloquently expressive of his feelings, Miss Davison put her hand caressingly through Denver's proffered arm.

"Of course I didn't," she said, in a very much more openly affectionate tone than she had ever used to Gerard. "How could you think I would do such a thing, Denver?"

Raising his hat mechanically, Gerard stepped back, with a look on his face as if he had been stabbed to the heart.

CHAPTER XVII

Gerard could scarcely believe his eyes when he saw how completely Miss Davison appeared to have forgotten his very existence the moment the American came up.

Denver, on his side, treated his rival as if he had never seen him before. Gerard thought, indeed, that the young American had perhaps failed to recognize him. For neither he nor Rachel had been speaking for some moments when they were startled by the figure appearing between them.

But that Miss Davison should behave with such marked incivility puzzled and bewildered him. Not the usual gracious smile and bow of farewell did she vouchsafe him as she walked away, listening amiably to the eager talk of the American, smiling in answer to his remarks, and behaving exactly as if she were enjoying his society to the utmost.

Gerard wondered what it meant. Was she a coquette? She had never given the least sign of it with him, having always been straightforward even in her reticence, not pretending that there was no mystery in her way of life, but treating it as one that she could not clear up, and that she wished him to leave unsolved also.

Now, however, she was certainly behaving as if she were encouraging the young American; she was animated, charming, sweet, and she was evidently aware that he was fascinated, and pleased by the fact.

Yet she had but a moment before been touched, tender, serious, moved by Gerard's emotion, and ready to consent to think over the passionate avowal which he had made.

Now it looked as if she had never had a serious thought in her life. Gerard could hear her rippling laugh, could see the lively movements of her hand and head, which showed that she was talking as eagerly to Denver as he to her.

He watched them until they had almost disappeared, and then he suddenly set his teeth and resolved not to be thrown off in this manner. He would follow them, go up to the group of which they formed part, join them and the rest of the Van Santens, and find out, if he could, whether Denver was looked upon as the accepted lover he certainly appeared to think himself.

He knew very well, as he approached the group of which the primly dressed and gentle old New England woman formed the center, that he was very foolish to come so near the candle, and that he was risking the singeing of his wings. But Miss Davison's attraction for him was stronger than his prudence, and a few moments after she had gone away

with Denver, Gerard found himself talking to old Mrs. Van Santen, and listening to Cora and Arthur Aldington as they flirted merrily on one side of him, and to Miss Davison and Denver, as they talked eagerly and apparently with great seriousness, on the other.

Delia Van Santen, watchful and tactful as ever, was the least talkative of the party, over whom she kept a watchful eye, ever ready to avert discord and to put in a pleasant word if disputes threatened or if conversation languished.

Only one member of the family was missing: this was Harry Van Santen, the elder brother, and in Gerard's opinion, by far the least prepossessing member of the family. He was at his club, the others explained; and nobody appeared to miss him.

Miss Davison did not turn once in Gerard's direction, or appear conscious that he had joined the party. She seemed to have eyes for no one but Denver, and it was impossible to doubt that, so far from being disposed to resent the attentions of the young American, she was doing her best to attract him, and succeeding perfectly in the attempt.

Nobody indeed appeared to have the least doubt of what was going on; and Arthur Aldington, during one of the rare intervals when he was not engrossed with Cora, laughed as he looked in the direction of the two, and remarked to Gerard that there

was little doubt that America was going to carry off one of our English beauties.

Gerard could not control all show of his indignation at the suggestion.

"She's only flirting with him," he said.

Arthur laughed dryly.

"It's more than that, I think, and so do the rest of the family. Ask Mrs. Van Santen."

Indeed the old lady had been beaming benevolently upon the young people for some time, as Gerard knew. And the knowledge that Rachel was thus openly avowing her preference for and encouragement of the man whom he considered a "bounder" oppressed and irritated him in equal degree.

In vain he struggled against his uneasiness, his anger. And at last, afraid of trusting himself among the sharp eyes which could, he did not doubt, fathom the distress he was suffering, he withdrew from the party, and rejoined his own.

But the evening was heavy and gloomy for him, and he felt that his very presence was casting depression over his friends, so he presently excused himself, and leaving them, was hurrying out of the grounds, when he chanced to catch sight of the Americans once more, and saw Rachel, still with Denver in close attendance, but with a look in her eyes which he recognized as no longer one of idle amusement, but of acute anxiety.

A moment later, as he was close to the gates,

he felt a touch on his arm, and looking round, found Arthur Aldington beside him.

"One moment, Buckland, Miss Davison sent me to say she would like to speak to you before you go away. If you'll wait near the seat by the trees over there, she'll find an opportunity of escaping, and I'll bring her there myself."

Gerard hesitated.

"She won't be able to get rid of that Van Santen," said he sullenly, as he glanced behind him.

"Trust a woman — especially a woman like Rachel — for getting rid of anyone she wants to get rid of," said Arthur. "And really my own opinion is that it would be an awful thing for her if she were to think seriously of that bounder."

Gerard echoed the word inquiringly.

Arthur nodded.

"Men don't like the fellow," he explained. "He's too noisy, too — too overbearing; too much side and too much swagger. It's amazing to everybody that a well-bred woman like Miss Davison should put up with him for a moment. It's the money, I suppose. Well, will you come?"

Gerard nodded silently. It was of no use to try to be wise where Rachel was concerned. He could only hope to escape being utterly foolish, and without much prospect of success.

Two minutes later he was waiting at the appointed spot, and in another two minutes Rachel herself,

with Arthur Aldington, came up and met him there. Arthur disappeared with a few words from Rachel, who arranged that he should fetch her in ten minutes and take her back to the Van Santens, and then she and Gerard were once more alone together.

The change in her was so sudden, so great, that he could scarcely believe his eyes. Every trace of the brilliant manner, of the laughing face, the light, easy manner, the slight affectation, which had distinguished her tone and manner but half an hour ago, when she was with Denver and among the rest, had disappeared, and given place to a demeanor touching in its grave sadness.

"Mr. Buckland," she began quite simply, as soon as Arthur was out of earshot, "you must think me a strange creature, I'm afraid."

"I don't know what to think of you," he replied desperately. "You seem to be, not one or two, but half a dozen women; and they're all charming, though some of them — might well break a man's heart."

"I don't wan't to break yours, or any man's," she said simply.

"You must break mine or Van Santen's," he said dryly, "if you go on acting as you've done this evening, being one woman, and a very sweet though puzzling one, to me, and quite another, a brilliant, charming one, to him. How am I to believe that you like one of us better than the other? You were cer-

tainly doing your best to make him think he was the man you liked. I don't want you to make a fool of me like that. I can't deny that you could if you wished."

She sighed softly.

"I'm not going to tell you I like you," she said gently. "You are welcome, if you wish, to believe I don't care in the least."

"No, no, I'd rather you should pretend you cared for me — at least, I think I'd rather!" stammered poor Gerard, who was struggling against the impulse to yield himself wholly to the personal fascination she exercised over him.

She looked at him steadily, but with eyes so mournful, so full of some deep-seated distress, that he was seized by an overpowering desire to know what the secret was which made her such a tantalizing, maddening mystery. Why was she so sweet to him, after having been but a short time before in his very presence, just as irresistible, in a wholly different fashion, to another man?

Was she a coquette, after all? Was she only trying to show her power, by bringing to her feet a man whom she had recently disgusted by her open encouragement of another?

Miss Davison read his thoughts.

"I don't pretend — to you," she said simply. "I don't tell you I care for you. You can think, if you like, that I like someone else better."

"But I don't like to think so!" burst out poor Gerard.

She went on imperturbably.

"You may think, if you like, that, overpowered, dazzled by the thought of marrying a rich man, and being out of reach of poverty, and saved from the necessity of hard and distasteful work any longer, I have decided to encourage the attentions of a man who is deeply in love with me, and who could undoubtedly enable me, if I married him, to live an easy and leisurely life. You may think, if you like, that I am quite at liberty to do this, and that it is the wisest thing I could do. You may think, too, if you please, that this rich man is not exactly the sort of man I should have chosen if I had been quite free to choose, but that, not being quite free, I was justified in encouraging, and in accepting him."

"But are you sure he is rich, and that he is not merely dependent upon the pleasure or caprice of a father who may, or may not, approve of him and intend to leave him well off?" argued poor Gerard earnestly. "Miss Davison, believe me, I wouldn't be selfish and mean enough to say a word against this young Van Santen if I could think him worthy of you. Believe me, though I own I'm jealous of him, I wouldn't show unworthy or despicable jealousy of him or of any man. But it has occurred to me to doubt whether he is the sort of man you ought to trust yourself with. And I should like, if I may

dare, to beg you not to definitely give your promise to marry him until his father has arrived in England, and until you've made sure that the young ones are really going to be well off."

Miss Davison smiled faintly.

"Do you want me to make sure of my bargain then, before I sign?" she asked.

"Yes," answered he steadily, "I do. I know I'm jealous: I own it. I think this Denver Van Santen is not good enough for you. But I understand your point of view, and I sympathize with you; and therefore, I say, if as I suppose, you propose to marry this man, not because you care particularly about him, but because he is well off and can make life easier for you, do not be in too great a hurry over it: make sure, before you promise, that the other side is in a situation to bring to the bargain all you expect of it. It sounds a cold-blooded way of speaking, I know, but, believe me, coldness is the last thing you need accuse me of where *you* are concerned."

Miss Davison listened with the same air of profound and serious interest that she had given to him earlier in the evening.

"You're quite right," she said at last. "Then whatever happens, I shall take your advice, and I shan't definitely accept Denver until I've seen his father."

Gerard assented eagerly.

"Yes, that's what I meant," he said quickly. "If old Van Santen, whom everybody seems to speak well of, should agree to the match, and if you should like him and get on well with him, then I say you might have a chance of happiness with the son; but —"

He stopped.

"But what?"

Gerard looked up, half shyly.

"I don't think it would become me to say any more," he said frankly, "considering, as I've told you, that I'm jealous."

Again a faint smile flickered over Rachel's face, then, in a sweet, low voice, she said —

"I like you to be jealous, Mr. Buckland."

But he burst out passionately —

"Don't. You have no right to use me like this, no right to send for me to talk about your intended marriage with another man, and then — and then — to try — to try —"

"To try to make you see that I'm grateful for the interest you've taken in me, that I appreciate your generosity, that I take pleasure in your society? Is that what I have no right to do, Mr. Buckland?"

But Gerard would not be brow-beaten. He stuck to his guns.

"Yes," he said stoutly, "that's what I contend. If you, knowing as you do that I'm madly in love with you, that I've loved you through everything,

in the face of mysteries and secrets which were enough to make me decide never to speak to you again, in the face of — other things of which I scarcely dare speak — if you, knowing all this, as I say, have sent for me only to tell me you're grateful for my interest and all the rest of it, you're treating me badly. You have no right to try to make me think of you more than I do, no right even to be kind, unless — unless —"

He paused, and she answered steadily —

"Unless I'm prepared to give up my career, my position, my friends, even, all for you? Is that what you mean?"

She said this with raised eyebrows, as if expecting him to receive her speech with a denial; but he took up the challenge at once.

"Yes," he said, "that, I suppose, is what I do mean. I don't think you ought to encourage a man to the extent you are encouraging that young Van Santen, and to try to encourage me — at the same time. It doesn't matter when a girl plays that sort of game with men who don't really care for her. But this Yankee fellow appears to be in earnest, and by Jove! you can't pretend to know that I'm not. You ought to make up your mind, and throw over the one, and stick to the other."

"I don't think you appreciate the difficulty of my position, Mr. Buckland."

"I don't suppose I do. How can I? You don't

take me into your confidence. And I'm ready to do without that. All I ask is that you should decide for your own happiness. If you think you will be happier with Van Santen for a husband than with me, why marry him and be happy; but I don't believe, somehow, that you do think that. I don't think you would send for me if you had nothing but that to tell me. Come, Rachel, why did you send for me? What had you to tell me?"

Miss Davison's handsome face quivered.

"I almost wish," she said, "now, that I hadn't sent for you; but —" Suddenly her face changed, and he saw a look of intense pain pass over it. "I couldn't bear that — you should think — I didn't care. And — only I don't want you to ask me why — I didn't dare to offend Denver by letting him think I cared for you."

"Still, you need not have turned away from me as you did, without a word. You might have given me a word, a smile, a look."

Rachel's breath came quickly, her face softened, her eyes grew tender, and she whispered —

"I didn't dare!"

The words were an admission, and in a moment Gerard was close beside her, looking into her face, begging her not to play with him.

"You love me, Rachel, you love me, and not this fellow! Why don't you own it? Why can't you throw him over, and tell him and everyone that you

care for me, that you're going to marry me? Don't worry your head about your career, about money, about anything. I can't make you rich at once, but I'm not quite a pauper even now. You will have to make some sacrifices, but they won't be so hard. Your mother will not mind living in a smaller house, and your sister has had a year's schooling, and Lady Jennings will take charge of her, and bring her out and all that. Even for your family there's no need for you to sacrifice your own happiness any longer. Rachel, Rachel, say that you will cut yourself off from all these people whom you hate and whom you are afraid of, and make up your mind to be happy."

She was deeply moved by his passionate words, and her tears were falling fast. But she was steadfast, even in her sorrow.

"I can't," she said. "You mustn't ask me why, but I can't. I know I've been selfish to ask you to come to speak to me, but I couldn't let you go like that — thinking I was like a stone. I'm involved — too deeply to get free. There — that's all I dare tell you. And now you had better try to forget me; it's the only thing to do. I've thought it over, indeed, and I can't get free, and I can't move independently."

This admission passionately uttered, was a terrible shock to Gerard.

"But what will the end be — it must have an end?" he asked quickly.

She turned upon him a look of intense alarm.

"An end! What do you mean?"

He spoke out boldly —

"You don't suppose it can go on forever? That the mystery will never be found out? That you can go on forever escaping by the skin of your teeth?"

A faint smile, confident if not very happy, appeared on her features.

"I'm in clever hands, very clever hands," she said.

"But the work revolts you! It's horrible — shocking!"

"Well, we won't discuss that now. I've told you before all that I could tell you about it. There's Arthur coming for me. I must go."

"One moment. Tell me honestly: would you give everything up and marry me, if you could?"

She hesitated.

"I don't know whether I dare answer you truly; but I will — if you will promise to take no advantage of what I say."

"I promise."

"Well then, yes, I would throw over everything — if I could."

He touched her arm trembling and hoarse.

"Now promise me just this, that you will make one appeal — one strong appeal — this week, at once, and try to get free; and let me know if you succeed. You will, if your heart is set on it, I know."

She shook her head drearily.

"You overrate my determination, my strength of

will, all the fine and noble qualities which, somehow or other, you still contrive to imagine in me," said she gently. "I have no such force of character as you think. I'm a poor, wretched puppet, dancing to anyone who is clever enough to play the right tune. Don't hope, don't hope."

"I do hope, all the same," cried he passionately, and hurriedly, as Arthur, perceiving that he was coming too soon, delayed a little, and lingered just out of earshot. "I want you to make this appeal, and to let me know the result. Will you? Will you?"

She smiled sadly.

"I can tell you the result already," said she despondently; "but if you like, I will make it."

He had no time to say more, for Arthur had joined them, rather sheepishly, rather bewildered. He carried Miss Davison back to her friends, and then caught Gerard up as he was leaving the grounds, having made him a sign that he wanted a word with him.

As soon as the two young men met, Arthur spoke —

"Rachel is treating you badly," said he.

"How do you mean?"

"Well, she's encouraging you, I could see by her looks, and yours. But — she's engaged to Denver Van Santen all the time."

Gerard was startled.

"Are you sure?"

"Denver says so — so do the family. It's looked upon as settled."

Gerard laughed harshly; but he would not believe.

"They may think so, but they may make too sure," he said.

Arthur Aldington threw at him a compassionate look, as one does at a man, once intelligent and amiable, who has just been declared a lunatic. But the words which rose to his lips, words of congratulation to Gerard on his escape, he thought it wiser not to utter.

CHAPTER XVIII

At the end of a week Gerard received a letter addressed in a hand-writing which he did not know, but which he felt sure was that of Rachel Davison. The very envelope and note paper seemed, he thought, to be characteristic of her.

The letter itself was very short.

"Dear Mr. Buckland,—I have kept my word to you. I have tried, and I have failed, as I said I should. Burn this, please.— Rachel."

Gerard looked long at the words, which seemed to burn into his brain. He knew what misery of effort and failure they recorded. But he did not comply with her command and burn the letter. He folded it carefully again, and treasured it as he might have done a communication from a dear friend. It seemed to him to be the knell of all his hopes.

But in spite of the despair with which the letter and his knowledge of some of the facts of Rachel's position inspired him, he did not cease to think about her, and to wonder if there were no possible means of freeing her from the unseen hands which were

holding her prisoner. If he had believed Denver to be an honorable man, he would have stifled his own feelings, and would have found consolation in knowing that, by marrying him, she would free herself at once from the thraldom in which she was held.

But unhappily, he could not feel sure that Denver himself was honest, and his memories of the day spent at the Priory were by no means of a sort to leave upon his mind an impression of unmixed innocence and bliss.

Was Denver one of the guiding spirits of a conspiracy, of which the man with the white mustache was a member? And was Denver anxious to marry Rachel in order to make stronger the bonds in which she was held?

Against this notion there stood out the remembrance of the rest of the Van Santen family; his knowledge that the father was a man of wealth and good repute; the mother a good creature incapable of guile; the daughters charming women, of whom it was difficult to suspect anything wrong; the two brothers indeed were not so satisfactory, but there was this to be said of Denver, that he boasted openly of his skill at cards, and was ready to challenge all comers. Of the plain-featured Harry, with the hard, sunless smile, Gerard knew nothing. Whether he won or lost at cards he did not talk about his luck, and his manner was as quiet and reticent as that of his brother was swaggering and loud.

Somehow Gerard did not trust him the more on that account.

While Gerard was still smarting from the blow of Rachel's letter, he was much surprised on reaching home to his chambers one afternoon at about five o'clock, to hear that a lady had called to see him, and not finding him, had said that she would call again between five and six.

While he was still asking questions about this mysterious lady, with certain absurd but undefined hopes in his heart, he was informed that she had come back again, and there was ushered into his presence, to his intense astonishment, the homely figure of Mrs. Van Santen.

He was so much surprised that for the moment he could scarcely greet her. He at once guessed that she had something to tell which he should not care to hear.

"You didn't expect to see me, did you, Mr. Buckland? I guess you are about as surprised as if the Empress of Morocco had looked in."

"I didn't expect this pleasure, certainly. It is all the greater," stammered Gerard, as he offered her a chair, and ordered some tea.

"No, don't you trouble to get me any tea. I've had some," said the good lady, as she settled herself in his best arm-chair, and looked round the room. "And so these are bachelor chambers, are they? And do you do your own house-keeping, Mr. Buckland?"

"Some of it," said Gerard, smiling. "Not always very successfully."

"I wonder you don't suit yourself with a wife, Mr. Buckland?"

"I've had thoughts of it sometimes. But on the whole —"

"They tell me," and she suddenly turned upon him a pair of eyes which he saw to be full of unexpected shrewdness, "that you had thoughts of Miss Davison."

He grew pale at the remark.

"Unfortunately she had no thoughts of me," he said hurriedly.

"Ah!" Mrs. Van Santen bent forward, and stared intently into his face. "There was something in it then? You know her well, this Miss Davison, Mr. Buckland?"

What on earth was she going to ask him? Gerard, feeling that he should be called upon to go through a trying ordeal, braced himself up to the occasion.

"I've had the pleasure of meeting her at the house of several of my friends."

"You know her people too, I suppose?"

"Yes, I know her mother, her sister, and, as I've said, a good many friends of hers."

"Ah! And they're good sort of people, satisfactory sort of people? There, there, don't get so red. I don't mean to put you through a long catechism. But the fact is, one of my sons has gone

and fallen in love with the girl, and I'm not quite sure I approve of it. I'm particular about my sons. I want them to marry girls who will have a good influence over them, and I'm not quite sure about this young woman."

Gerard was aghast. He could see that the mother's shrewdness had fathomed the fact that there was some mystery about Miss Davison, and, with the daring of an American, she had at once searched in the ranks of her acquaintances for someone who would be likely to tell her all she wanted to know about her proposed daughter-in-law. She had had the wit to guess that Gerard, who was evidently in love with the girl himself, would not be inclined to be too indulgent towards her, or to paint her family or herself in too rosy colors to his successful rival's family.

Gerard did not know what to say. He felt quite sure that, whatever might be the ugly truth about the bondage Rachel was in, she was quite good enough for a man like Denver, a boastful, swaggering fellow, fond of cards and of little else, and as obtrusive and bold in his love-making as if he had been twenty times Rachel's superior.

On the other hand, he shrank from telling a direct lie to this simple and trusting woman, who had come to him in her doubts and fears to learn the truth about her son's future wife.

"Surely," he said rather coldly, "your son is old enough and clever enough to hold his own, and to be

ready to influence his wife rather than to be influenced by her."

The old lady shook her head slowly.

"One might say so, if one knew the world less well than I do," she said shortly. "But a handsome wife can do a lot one way or the other with a man."

"What makes you think Miss Davison's influence would be other than good?" asked Gerard.

The old lady put her head on one side and looked at him keenly.

"Perhaps it's a kind of instinct, as one may say," said she. "Or perhaps it's something I've noticed and wondered at. She's by way of being a bit of a flirt, isn't she now, Mr. Buckland? She's been nice to you, and nice to Denver, of course. And it seems to me she's looked at that young man Jones in a way that suggested that she'd been nice to him too, though, mind you, she told us she'd never met him before he came to our house. Now do you happen to know whether that was true or not?"

The old lady had been sharp-eyed, and Gerard felt uneasy under her keen glance.

He thought evasion of the point his best course.

"Who is Jones?" he asked innocently. "Have I met him? Do I know him?"

"He was at the Priory that day you came," said Mrs. Van Santen. "A quiet-looking young man with a black mustache."

Now Gerard had some reason for believing that

the young Van Santens knew Cecil Jones as well as Rachel did, but he could not make this suggestion to their innocent old mother. So he said —

"I remember; but I can tell you nothing about him, as it was the first time I'd met him myself, and I haven't seen him since."

The old lady was watching him keenly. Evidently she was conscious that something was not quite above-board in her surroundings; but Gerard, while sympathizing with her strongly, felt that he could not betray his own fears, lest he should bring suspicion upon Miss Davison.

He thought that the motherly body had perhaps been slowly waking to the knowledge that her sons' card-playing was excessive, and that she might also have heard nasty things said about Denver's unfailing luck. She seemed rather disappointed that she could not learn more from him.

"Now as to this Miss Davison," she went on, in a grumbling tone, "of course she's very good-looking and all that, and dresses in style, and carries herself like a queen; but I should like to meet her mother, and the girl doesn't seem to want to let us meet. Do you know all about the old lady? And her family?"

"I know the mother is the widow of an officer who had rather a distinguished career, and that the family is a good one, several members of it holding high posts in the army and navy, especially the army."

The old lady nodded dubiously.

"I should like to see some of these grand relations," she said at last, rather sharply. "We're good enough for ladies with titles to call upon; I should have thought we were good enough for these Davisons!"

"Oh, there's no suspicion of that sort of thing about them," said Gerard hastily. "Mrs. Davison is the mildest and gentlest of elderly ladies, and she would be very shy, I think, if she were to find herself in such a merry crowd as that you had at the Priory the Sunday I was there."

"Why don't she live with her daughter?" asked Mrs. Van Santen aggressively.

"Miss Davison has to live in London, on account of her work. It doesn't agree with her mother."

"H'm! That place agrees with most mothers that agrees with their young daughters," said she dryly. "And as for Miss Davison's work, she's having a good long holiday, I guess, just now!"

"Doesn't she come backwards and forwards to town from the Priory?"

"Oh, yes, she does, now and then; but she must be clever if she can do much work during the short time she's away! However, I won't take up your time, Mr. Buckland, if you're busy. I'm sorry you can't say more to set my mind at rest about the girl. But, anyhow, I hope you'll come down and see us again. We're always glad to see our friends, you

know, and there's generally a good many of them down there, and we give them a good time, as you know. Good-bye."

She shook hands with him and went away, refusing to let him accompany her as far as the door, where she said that she had a cab waiting.

Her visit made Gerard uneasy, as it confirmed some of his fears. He felt little doubt that the mother was anxious about her sons' gambling propensities, and that her sharp eyes had discovered that there was some mystery about the woman whom she, at least, looked upon as her younger son's fiancée.

The visit of the old lady left him in a state of great confusion of mind. He did not know quite how things stood at the Priory, whether the engagement was definite, in spite of Rachel's promise, or whether she was waiting, as she had said she would do, for Mr. Van Santen's appearance.

And he could not tell how much Mrs. Van Santen really knew about Miss Davison, and whether she was concealing the full extent of her suspicions, in order to learn more if she could.

He wished that he could get another opportunity of conversing with Rachel herself; and he resolved, in spite of his knowledge that he would find the experience a trying one, upon going down to the Priory again, as Mrs. Van Santen had invited him to do, on the very next Sunday.

The weather had changed since his last visit; the evenings had become chilly; and the card-playing was carried on with more zest than ever in consequence.

Otherwise the essential features of the hospitality offered were the same. Cora sang; Delia went from group to group, with ready tact and charm smoothing over gaps in the conversation, and introducing to each other such people as she thought would find each other's conversation congenial. Mrs. Van Santen was the same homely, dear old soul as ever, pouring out tea and coffee with energy, and plaintively telling her sons she wished they had something better to do than play cards morning, noon, and night. While the brothers played poker and bridge assiduously, and Rachel, as handsomely dressed as ever, but with a face paler than before, took rather a background position, and seemed listless and languid, and anxious to avoid Gerard.

Arthur Aldington was there, but Cecil Jones was not. And the time passed much as it had passed on the occasion of Gerard's last visit until quite late in the evening, when suddenly, while Gerard was sitting in the music-room, with Arthur, listening to Cora's exquisite singing, a man's voice rang out through the adjoining room, and that in which they were, from the room devoted to card-playing, which was the furthest away of all.

"I say that you're not playing fair! I say that I've been cheated!"

It was the voice of Sir William Gurdon, and upon the last word they all heard his fist come down with a loud crash upon the table.

CHAPTER XIX

Upon Gerard the sounds of the disturbance came with a curious sense of something long expected having come to pass. He scarcely felt so much as a slight shock of surprise.

Being, therefore, in a condition to notice things, he looked round him at the various faces in the music-room, and noted the effect the noise had upon his companions.

Cora, who was singing at the piano to her own accompaniment, stopped short with a low cry, and covered her face with her hands.

Arthur who was standing beside her, grew red and indignant, and called Sir William by several uncomplimentary names.

Lady Sylvia and Delia, who were talking on a sofa, looked at each other in horror, and rose, as if uncertain what to do.

Two men whom Gerard had previously seen at the Priory, and who were staying in the music-room to listen to Cora's singing in the intervals of poker, muttered something to each other in an undertone, and promptly went to the scene of the disturbance.

Gerard, having noticed these things, and hearing that the disturbance in the card-room was growing louder instead of calming down, slipped out of the room and across the next, and looked in at the third, where the unpleasant scene was taking place.

As he passed through the intermediate room, he noticed that Mrs. Van Santen, with her poor old face blanched with horror, was sitting alone bolt upright in a corner, clasping her hands and apparently too much alarmed to speak or to move.

In the card-room itself all was confusion. Sir William Gurdon, flushed, excited, scarcely intelligible was glaring across the card-table at Denver Van Santen, who had risen, like all the rest of the players, and who was standing with his arms folded and with a proud look of indignation on his handsome face, surrounded by men who were all speaking at once, some addressing one of the disputants, and some the other, and all failing in making themselves distinctly heard.

Harry Van Santen, who was the coolest man in the room, was the first person to make himself clearly heard. Standing on the outskirts of the crowd, he cried, in a thin, sharp, penetrating voice —

"Give him a chance. Make yourself understood, Sir William, if you're sober enough."

At these words, which raised a fresh issue, and were met with a torrent of incoherent words from the young baronet, and with murmurs from the rest of the men, the ladies in the room, who had most of them

drawn away from the crowd of angry men, and gathered in a knot in a corner, whispered to each other and made towards the door.

Harry Van Santen, who perceived this movement, hastened to open the door, saying in a low voice to the most important lady of the group —

"Yes, that's right. This is no scene for you ladies. The fellow's drunk."

He shut the door when they had all gone out, and returned to the card-table, where three or four of the men were now with difficulty holding Sir William back from a personal assault upon Denver whose calmly contemptuous attitude and tone were irritating him to madness.

The uproar continued, and indeed grew worse, as excited partisans on either side tried to outshout the rest.

In the midst of the noise and the turbulent movements of the crowd of men a figure flitted lightly past Gerard, followed immediately by another; and Delia and Miss Davison, the former leading, the other following close behind, made their way into the group with the authority born of combined intelligence and experience, and at once found a hearing.

"Gentlemen," said Delia, "this scene is very distressing, and not one of you can make himself heard or understood if you all speak at once. Will you separate for a time, and all think calmly over what has happened — or has not happened — and then

come together to discuss the matter like reasonable persons? If not for your own sakes, I think you will do so for my mother's and for ours, will you not?"

Manner, voice, tone, all were perfect, and one after another the men fell back, acknowledging the justice of her speech, and willing to obey her suggestion.

Sir William alone of the visitors was obdurate. While Denver merely retreated a few steps, and then threw himself with an air of insolent defiance on a sofa, the baronet maintained his position in the middle of the room, and poured forth his woes as incoherently and volubly as ever.

He paid no heed to Delia, who looked at Miss Davison with a little gesture of despair.

Then Rachel came up to Sir William, and laying her hand on his sleeve, said gently —

"Don't you think, Sir William, you had better talk this over quietly with someone — with me, if you like? And I will listen to all you have to say, and will do anything I can to put the matter right."

"You can't put it right. I beg your pardon, Miss Davison, but really this isn't a thing I can discuss with a lady. I've been che—"

"Oh, hush, hush! Think what you're saying."

"I've been cheated, I say. I'm sorry to have had to make a disturbance, but it doesn't alter the fact that —"

"For the sake of the ladies of the family, won't you be reasonable? Wait a little; calm down a little,

and then hear what there is to be said on the other side."

"There's nothing to be said, Miss Davison, nothing, that is to say, that I could listen to or believe. You must really excuse me. It's with the men of the family that I have to deal. Or at least with the fellow Denver. But I suppose it's six of one and half a dozen of the other, and that while one cheats at poker, the other does at bridge!"

Under the influence of the lady's gentle talk, Sir William had grown, not only too coherent, but so definite and precise in his accusations, so sweeping in his charges, that every ear was strained to catch what he said, and Denver, lounging on the sofa, grew perceptibly redder as he was forced to listen too.

But Miss Davison, determined to end this painful scene in her own way, took the young baronet's arm, almost as if she had been taking him into custody, and insisted on his leading her — or more properly being led by her — into the adjoining room, where Mrs. Van Santen, still the picture of woe, was sitting in her high-backed chair, and receiving the condolences of one or two of the ladies, while the others went into the music-room, with the exception of Lady Sylvia, who, much disgusted at the scene she had been forced to witness, had ordered her car round and taken her departure.

"Say something nice to the old lady, do, Sir William," pleaded Rachel coaxingly in his ear.

"How can I say anything nice to her, when I know her son is a card —"

Miss Davison would not let him finish.

"You know nothing certainly," she broke in quickly. "You suspect, but that's not enough. Do pray remember what you owe to all of us, and whatever you may think or fancy, keep your suspicions to yourself until you can talk things over quietly with another man."

"But I'm certain —" began he again.

"Well, tell what you think to — to — let me see — Mr. Buckland and Mr. Aldington. They saw everything. Let them judge."

"Excuse me, they saw nothing," persisted Sir William, who was now speaking more quietly, but who was not in the least disposed to waver in his statement as to what he had seen. "I don't think they were even in the room till the row had begun."

She was leading him gently across the middle room, deeming it more prudent not to let him speak to Mrs. Van Santen in his obvious state of irritation. She made him take her, therefore, into the music-room, where Cora and Arthur were conversing near the piano, and where two or three other small knots of people were discussing the distressing affair in low voices.

Gerard was sitting by himself not far from the piano, and Delia had come in to do her usual work of smoothing things over in any direction where she

saw that her services would be useful. Miss Davison made straight for Gerard.

"Do, Mr. Buckland," said she, bending down to speak pleadingly, and meanwhile looking at him with steady eyes eloquent of her anxiety, "speak to Sir William, and try to persuade him to make some sort of apology, to believe that he has made a mistake, a great and dreadful mistake. I don't want him to leave the house until he's been brought to listen to reason," she added earnestly, speaking quickly, and in such a low voice that only Gerard heard her.

For he had started to his feet at her first words, and was standing on one side of her, while Sir William, still angry and stiff, was on the other.

Gerard felt himself to be in a very difficult position. Of course he believed implicitly that the baronet was right, that he had suddenly found out the meaning of the constant and heavy losses at cards which he had sustained when playing with the young Van Santens. It was horrible to find Rachel taking the part of these men, whom he now looked upon as little better than swindlers, knowing, as he did, that she must be perfectly well aware of what had been going on.

And yet he did not like to refuse her request, especially as, even if his suspicions and those of Sir William were correct, the baronet had now had his lesson, and it was most desirable on all accounts to avoid a scandal.

So, after a moment's hesitation, he said, "All right. I'll do what I can," and thrusting his hand through the young baronet's arm, he led him into the conservatory which opened from this room, and asked him to tell him all about it.

Briefly and clearly — for he had now had time to collect his thoughts — Sir William explained exactly what he had seen, and his reasons for believing that he had been robbed.

Gerard listened attentively and without interruption, and was quite sure that the young baronet was correct in his surmise, and that Denver, having robbed him persistently and with ease, had at last grown careless, and manipulating the cards without so much skill as usual, had been found out.

"There," said Sir William, when he had finished his recital, "that's what I saw; and whatever you tell me, I shall think the same, that I've been cheated, and that to-night is probably not the first time."

Gerard did not at once reply. Cora and Arthur Aldington were observing them, and he saw the girl whisper something to Arthur, in response to which he nodded, and leaving her, strolled over to join the two young men.

"I hope you've changed your mind about what you fancied you saw," said he to Sir William, who laughed dryly and shook his head.

"Oh, no, I haven't," he said. "These Yankees have had me for a mug; and I've no doubt, as I've

just been saying to Buckland, that what I found out to-night was really only the end of what had been going on for some time, in fact ever since I was fool enough to come here first."

Arthur looked angry.

"Really, Gurdon, I think you ought to measure your words a little more carefully," he said stiffly. "We are friends of these people, Buckland and I, and we can't allow such things to be said uncontradicted, can we?"

Gerard shook his head.

"You see, Sir William, it's impossible for you to be quite sure on such a point. It would need some confirmation —"

"Confirmation! Do you doubt my word?"

"Of course not. What I do doubt is whether we ought to be sure without proof stronger than the eyes of one person. No, no, don't get angry again. I mean that, supposing I had seen what you saw, and believed what you believed, I should have thought twice about bringing such a grave — such an awful accusation — in a room full of ladies — and should have waited to discuss quietly with some other fellows what was the best thing to be done."

Sir William reddened. He himself had by this time begun to feel considerable regret that he had been so rashly outspoken.

"It's all very well," he grumbled, "to give advice like that; but I tell you, when you suddenly make a

discovery like that — when you're absolutely sure, mind you, as I was and am — you forget all rules of prudence, even perhaps of propriety, and you go for the swindler there and then."

"Sh — sh," said Gerard.

Arthur reddened.

"Come, I say, Gurdon, you shouldn't say things like that without a lot more proof than you've got, that things are not on the square," said he, with excitement.

"By Jove! What better proof can a man have than the evidence of his own eyes?" asked Sir William. "I'm convinced, as I tell you, that I've been deliberately robbed. And the only reason why I'm allowing myself to be persuaded to sit here quietly and to let things simmer down, instead of leaving the house at once, is that the thing is too flagrant to be passed over, and that I intend to give information about it to the police."

Both his hearers protested at once, incoherently, in a low voice.

"Nonsense," said Arthur. "How on earth can you bring disgrace upon the ladies by doing such a thing as that? How can you, after being hospitably received by Mrs. Van Santen, give information against one of her sons? It's impossible."

"I'm going to do it, though," said Sir William, with ominous tranquillity. "If I were not absolutely certain of what I saw, I need not tell you I would

never do such a thing. As it is, I'm convinced I was only what you call hospitably received for the purpose of being plundered; and, as I say, I'm not going to put up with it quietly. I'm going to give information to the police. If there's nothing in my charge, it will be all right, of course. They will listen to me quietly, and no more will be heard of it. But if, on the other hand, the information I give chimes in with anything they know, or may know in the future, about these people, then my evidence may prove useful, and I shouldn't hesitate to give it."

He was so quietly determined that Gerard looked upon it as a hopeless task to try to dissuade him from his purpose. Indeed, he was not sorry to hear his intention. If the Van Santens were swindlers, it was time they were brought to justice. And if, unhappily, Miss Davison were mixed up with them, there was ample time to warn her of what was in store for the family.

Arthur, however, could not take it so quietly. He was indignant at the aspersions cast upon the Americans, and poured forth an eloquent tribute to their charms, pointing out that he too had lost money at cards there, but that he did not shriek out that he had been robbed, but ascribed his losses to his own chuckleheadedness in playing with people who openly said that they played a better game than he did.

All such sneers as these, however, were lost upon Sir

William. And to Arthur's reminder that he would be making things very unpleasant for the ladies who were among the visitors at the Priory, the baronet was equally deaf. Indeed, he took this suggestion as the text for another sermon.

"By the by," he said to Gerard, "have you ever noticed that, although the Van Santens get plenty of visitors, you never meet any of their own countrymen here?"

Gerard himself had noticed the fact, and said so, adding, however, that he believed it was usual with Americans to invite English people of rank, whenever they could get them, in preference to their own people.

Sir William, however, persisted in seeing a sinister significance in everything that concerned the Van Santens, and he turned to communicate his doubts to another man, while Arthur, full of indignation, went back to Cora, and bursting with anger, most indiscreetly let out the fact that Sir William was going to complain about his supposed grievance to the police.

Cora turned very pale, and uttered a little scream of horror.

"Then you may tell Sir William from me that he's not a gentleman," she said, with flashing eyes. "Whatever he may think of himself and his title, he's just the meanest thing that breathes! When he's been received here so well, and has had such a good

time! Oh, what will my mother say? I must go and tell her!"

"I shouldn't, if I were you, at least till the people are gone," said Arthur persuasively. "Remember, he can't do you any harm. He can give as much information as he likes; no notice will be taken of it, and he will merely be informed that observation shall be kept upon the house."

But the words inflamed Cora's wrath still more.

"Observation kept upon our house!" she said indignantly. "Where people of rank come every day! No, indeed, the police shall do nothing of the sort. Let the fellow dare to bring an honest, open charge against my brothers, and then see what evidence we shall bring on our side! Observation indeed!"

And she left him, and ran, shaking with indignation, into the next room, where she took Mrs. Van Santen aside, and poured into her ears the story of Sir William's cowardly attacks and threats.

The old lady, in great alarm, called for Delia and Miss Davison, and hurriedly consulted them as to what was to be done. She was in a state of the greatest anxiety, but showed more quiet good sense than might have been expected from one so simple in the world's ways.

"Isn't one of you two girls clever enough," she said, "to talk to this young man and show him that he's behaving as badly as a man can? What have we done that he should insult us like this? Even if

Denver had not played fair — which we all know is ridiculous — it would be worse behavior in this young man to insult us all as he wants to do, than it would have been of Denver to do what he says he believed he saw him do."

"He must be stopped," said Delia firmly. "He must be made to see he's making an ass of himself. We can't have a scandal made about us, and all our English friends offended and made to stay away."

She was addressing Rachel, whose face was very grave.

"Of course," said Miss Davison, "it doesn't much matter if he does behave as he suggests. Everybody knows you and knows the sort of society you receive."

"And that you, who have lots of friends in the best society, actually stay with us," added Delia.

Miss Davison assented.

"I really don't think you need distress yourself about this silly lad," she said. "He would harm no one but himself if he were to go to a police-station and tell his absurd tale. He has already made half the people here think him mad, and I'm going to tell him so."

She swept across the floor and entered the music-room, where the baronet was talking in a low voice, but with great excitement, to two or three other men who had been witnesses of the scene at the card-table.

She broke into the group and called him aside, and,

in a voice which was audible all over the room, protested strongly and energetically against his behavior.

"I should have thought," she said, with a haughty movement of her handsome head, "that, if you had been undeterred by any other consideration, the knowledge that I, a friend of so many of your own friends, have been staying with the Van Santens, would have been enough to convince you that such a thing as you imagine could not occur here."

But the young man, who had appeared so good-humored and so easy to manage on previous occasions, was now as firm and as stubborn as he had before been gentle.

"It is because you, a young lady of known position and a friend of so many others of position, have stayed with these people and made a friend of them, that I and my friends have taken them up," he retorted shortly. "It makes them all the more dangerous that they've succeeded in hoodwinking a lady as clever as you are."

The word caused a movement of astonishment at his tenacity, in the group of men who were within hearing.

"Really, Sir William, you talk as if you were in a den of thieves!" said Miss Davison haughtily.

"Really, Miss Davison, I am inclined to think that I am," retorted the baronet, as he bowed and withdrew into the next room.

Rachel was left standing, pale, indignant, frightened, in the middle of the music-room. The other men who had heard something of this short passage of arms, came round her, apologizing for Sir William, expressing the opinion that he had had too much champagne, and that there was no other explanation of his conduct than that, or a sudden attack of insanity.

Miss Davison received these remarks graciously, again expressing her astonishment that Sir William could make himself so ridiculous.

Before she had finished speaking, the group was added to by two or three more persons, one of whom was Gerard Buckland. With him she presently walked away towards the conservatory, and when they were out of hearing of the rest, she said in a low voice —

"If you can't succeed in persuading Sir William not to carry out his absurd intention, but to declare — before he leaves the house that he has given it up, I advise you to look after him, Mr. Buckland."

"To look after him! What do you mean?"

She raised her eyelids slowly, and looked at him with a strange, arresting steadiness.

"Oh, I only mean, of course, that since it's plain that he is scarcely in his right senses, he ought to be — *closely watched*."

CHAPTER XX

Gerard stood still in a state approaching stupefaction as Miss Davison, having given him this extraordinary warning, turned quickly away.

He did not know whether she was speaking in the interest of Sir William Gurdon or in that of the Van Santens, but after a little reflection he decided that he had better profit by her words, at least to the extent of ascertaining exactly what the young baronet was going to do, and how he fared in doing it.

Gerard had, on this occasion, come down by train by himself, instead of in Arthur Aldington's car. Full of his resolution, and confirmed in it by Miss Davison's manner when he said good-bye, he went down the drive by himself, and then waited outside the gates for the coming of Sir William's motor-car.

Sir William came out a few minutes later, driving his car himself, as usual. Perceiving Gerard, he stopped, and apparently anxious to have someone to confide his grievances to once more, he asked him, as Gerard had expected and hoped, whether he should give him a lift back to town.

Gerard thanked him and took the seat beside Sir

William, while the chauffeur got inside the car. As Gerard expected, the baronet broke out into fresh denunciation of the Van Santens without delay.

"I don't believe the one of them is any better than the other, and I shouldn't be surprised to hear that they've been warned out of New York. I'm going to make some inquiries about them," he said.

"Do they know that?" asked Gerard.

"I daresay they do by this time. I've made no secret of it since I found out I'd been cheated," said the baronet angrily.

"Why didn't you keep your plans to yourself? If you're wrong, it's rough upon them, but especially upon the ladies of the family, whom you surely don't implicate in their brothers' malpractices — if they are malpractices."

"I'm not wrong, I can't be wrong. And as for the ladies, I don't accuse them of having anything to do with their brothers' tricks, of course, but one can't consider those points when one is dealing with rogues. And if you mean Miss Davison, I can only say I'm surprised to find her in such dubious company."

Now Gerard, unfortunately, had been too much used to seeing Rachel in similar circumstances to be deeply offended by the suggestion. But, doubtful as he felt concerning the circumstances which had made her such an intimate friend of the Americans, he was bent on saving her from the punishment

which he knew that they deserved, and which he hoped that she would contrive to escape.

"Well, if you're right, you can't be too cautious in the way you go to work to bring them to book. You had far better make inquiries yourself than at once put the matter into other hands," he suggested.

The baronet shrugged his shoulders. Although he passed for "a bit of a fool," he was very tenacious of his purpose when once he had made up his mind upon any point, and he had thoroughly resolved upon the course he meant to adopt now. So he said nothing in answer to this, and before Gerard had decided what to say next, they were both startled by an explosion, followed by another, and the next moment the tire of one of the back wheels of the motor-car had burst, and the car itself was on its side in the ditch by the side of the road.

Sir William was shot right over the wheel and into the hedge on the other side of the ditch, while Gerard was flung over the wind screen into the ditch itself.

A minute later he had scrambled out, unhurt but plastered with mud, and was standing, with the chauffeur by his side, looking at the wrecked car, while Sir William, who had regained his feet and was on the other side of the hedge in a stubble-field, was expressing his indignation and annoyance, and, as might have been expected, ascribing the accident to the agency of the Van Santens.

"This is no accident," he said, as he stood, livid

with rage, on the bank, when he had scrambled through the hedge and had joined the other two. "The back tires were perfectly sound when I left town this afternoon. They've been tampered with by those fellows at the Priory."

To Gerard this fresh accusation seemed far-fetched and absurd for the first moment; but when the chauffeur joined his assurances to those of his master, that the tires had been in perfect order, and moreover that he had seen one of the gentlemen examining the car, and when, upon inquiry, it turned out that the gentleman in question was Denver Van Santen, even Gerard began to think there might have been some foul play.

After a short discussion it was decided that the chauffeur should remain with the car, and that the two gentlemen should walk on to the nearest town, which was some two miles away, and make arrangements both for the digging out of the car and for continuing their journey by rail.

As they walked along, for the most part in silence, along the road, which was shaded by a row of trees on one side, Gerard fancied he heard footsteps on the other side of the hedge. In the state of nervous excitement and suspicion into which he and his companion had both been thrown by the occurrences of the evening, this incident seemed strange to Gerard, who imparted his belief that they were being shadowed to Sir William. Keeping his voice low he

suggested that they should make a dash for the hedge together at the point where he thought he had heard the footsteps last.

The other agreeing, the two young men made a rush for the hedge, climbed up the bank with rapid steps, and scrambled through the briars just in time to see a figure disappearing into a plantation near at hand. At the suggestion of the baronet, they went in pursuit, and got so close to the quarry that a few more strides would have brought them up to him, when suddenly he made a plunge forward, and disappeared from their sight among the trees of the little wood.

Sir William would have made another dash to secure him, but Gerard held him back.

"Take care!" he whispered. "Did you see what he had in his hand?"

Sir William drew back with a low cry.

"No," he whispered back, "but I saw who he was!"

The two men exchanged looks, and then, with one accord, they dropped the pursuit and regained the road as quickly as possible.

Not until they were a long way from the plantation did they stop and exchange their thoughts.

"He carried a revolver," whispered Gerard.

"It was Harry Van Santen," said Sir William.

After that, both men walked on faster, and said little, until they had reached a part of the road so open that there was no further need of caution.

Gerard by this time fully appreciated the value of Miss Davison's warning. She had guessed that some attempt would be made upon the revengeful baronet, and had done her best for him by her quietly dropped word.

"Now," said Gerard, when they could talk more freely, "you will understand the need of caution in dealing with these people. If you had been alone —"

Sir William nodded.

"It would have been all up with me by this time," he added grimly. "Well, you were right, Buckland, one can't be too careful in dealing with these people."

"Will you take my advice *now*," said Gerard earnestly, "and give up all idea of going to the police openly? Write to the Van Santens, say you've had a talk with me, and that you are convinced you made a mistake, and that you are ready to apologize! Tell them that we had an adventure to-night, that we came across a poacher, and nearly got up with him, that he took us for keepers and ran with all his might."

The baronet looked at him quickly.

"Will they believe that?" he asked.

"It doesn't matter if they don't," said Gerard. "I want them to think that you've been frightened into holding your tongue. I want you to keep clear of police-stations to-night, as we shall probably be shadowed. And I suggest that you should communi-

cate with the police, if you mean to do so, by letter only. And give a warning that, if a policeman is sent to see you, he must be in plain clothes."

Sir William, now thoroughly alarmed, agreed to all these suggestions without demur, and following the directions given him, took care not to go near a police-station that night.

Two days later, after having remained indoors all the time, he wrote to Gerard to tell him to keep away from the Priory, as he had communicated with the police, and a detective was to be among the guests on the following Sunday. He said that he had written an apology to Mrs. Van Santen, and "made it all right with them." And he ended by a hope that Gerard would find some means to induce Miss Davison to break off her connection with these dubious people, at least until the police had satisfied themselves about them.

Now Gerard dared not write to Miss Davison, for fear of his letter falling into other hands than hers. All he could do, therefore, was to go down to the Priory on the following Sunday, in the hope that he might be able to warn her to get away in time to prevent her being involved in the catastrophe which was bound to come.

He was very nervous as he approached the Priory, having come by train, as on the last occasion. He wondered whether Harry Van Santen knew that he had been recognized, and whether he would find

marked changes to have taken place in the conduct of the establishment since the sensational charges brought against it on the previous Sunday.

Rather to his surprise, he found everything as usual there. Not even the ladies, who had been the most frequent among the guests, appeared to have been frightened away. For on entering the drawing-room where they were all assembled after luncheon, he at once recognized two or three faces of ladies who had been there the Sunday before.

If possible, the gayety, which was a feature of the place, was greater than ever. The Van Santens all greeted him exactly as if nothing had happened, with the exception of Mrs. Van Santen, who said to him triumphantly, when he shook hands with her —

"Ah, Mr. Buckland, I'm very pleased to see you again. Have you heard that your friend Sir William Gurdon has written a long and most handsome apology for the way he behaved last Sunday? I got it on Tuesday last, and I at once sent a copy of it to all the ladies and gentlemen who were here when he made that ill-mannered outbreak. I couldn't send you one, because I didn't know your address. But I'll show you the letter itself presently."

Gerard congratulated her as well as he could, and in the meantime his eyes roamed about in search of two people: Miss Davison for one; the detective who was to be among the guests this day, for the other.

Miss Davison he soon discovered. She was the

only person there who appeared to be in the least changed since the previous Sunday. Pale she always was, but now she was ghastly; while the dark rings under her eyes told an eloquent tale of sleepless nights, and a peculiar haggard look about the outline of her face betrayed to his eyes, keen where she was concerned, the fact that she had been rendered uneasy and unhappy by the occurrences of the momentous day.

He did not at once approach her: he was particularly anxious not to seem in a great hurry to speak to her alone, and besides, he felt very diffident as to her reception of the news he had for her.

Would she take the warning quietly and disappear in time to escape the general disaster? Or would she betray him, and make use of the information he had for her in the interests of the Van Santens?

Gerard could not make up his mind on this point; and he was in a state of great distress as to whether he was about to render her a great service or to render one to the American swindlers whom he dreaded to find were her accomplices.

But everything must be risked for her sake. In the meantime he looked carefully about him, in the hope of discovering among those of the guests whom he did not know the detective who was to be there on the information of Sir William.

The task was an easy one. There was only one strange face there, that of a man with a heavy black

mustache who was, Gerard thought, unmistakably a police officer in disguise.

This fact ascertained, he lost no time in approaching Miss Davison, and, after the first greetings, said to her in a low voice —

"Don't look shocked, I beg. I have to warn you that there is a police detective here to-day. Don't ask me how I know; but you may depend upon its being the truth."

Miss Davison bowed her head in grave silence.

"I was sure of it!" she said in a low voice.

CHAPTER XXI

Then for a few moments there was silence. The words Miss Davison had uttered so hastily, in response to his warning that there was a detective present, Gerard could not but look upon as an admission.

If all had been right at the Priory, why should she have expected to see there an agent of the police?

She seemed to see that her words were a mistake, for presently she laughed without much merriment, and said, looking at him with a steady gaze which had in it something of what he felt to be unmerited reproach —

"And so your friend Sir William thinks he had better be on the safe side. That is what you call hedging, isn't it, in racing matters? He writes a letter of humble apology for his rudeness to Mrs. Van Santen, and at the same time takes care to expose her — and us all, to the ignominy of having a detective introduced to the house to watch us and to see that we do not cheat at cards?"

Gerard met her gaze steadily.

"In the circumstances, I don't think he is to be blamed, Miss Davison. I think, on the contrary, that his conduct is more excusable than mine. For as,

whether he was cheated or no, he undoubtedly believed that he was, he may have thought himself at liberty to use all possible means of getting proof of the fact. I, on the other hand, while believing that he was cheated, and that other people have been cheated here, have warned you of the fact that the house is sheltering a detective, although I am afraid you may make use of my warning to put these thieves on their guard."

Miss Davison heard him with a set white face, but without any interruption. They were standing together in the veranda, for, late as the season was, the afternoon was so fine that the French windows were open, and the guests of the Van Santens were strolling in and out, between the house and the grounds.

After a short pause she laughed again in the same hard, forced way as before.

"If you think I am likely to put thieves on their guard against the possibility of detection, you must believe that I am a friend, not to say an accomplice, of thieves myself?" she said quietly, at last.

Gerard shook his head, but hesitated what to reply.

At last he said: "I can't deny that I believe your friends are not always well chosen. I have had proof of it before."

"Don't you think that, if you were wise, you would leave to her fate a woman who had so many

questionable friends, and whom you could not depend upon from one moment to another? "

Gerard took up her challenge with sudden fire.

" Yes," he said, " I do think I should be wiser if I could do as you suggest; but, unluckily for me, I can't. For, good or ill, Rachel, I love you so much that I can't believe the evidence of my own eyes when you are in question. So that I am behaving like an imbecile, and persisting in refusing to believe anything but good of you, even though I am forced to believe very much that is not good of your friends and acquaintances."

As usual when he made a speech like this, owning his steady interest in her, Miss Davison's face broke up into softness and gentleness, thus riveting his chains, even while she would give him no hope that she was innocent of the things of which he thus by implication accused her.

For a moment he thought she was on the point of bursting into tears. But she exercised strong self-control, and carefully abstaining from again meeting his eyes, knowing what sort of look she should meet if she did, she turned her head languidly in the direction of the interior of the house, and said —

" But you mustn't expect me to do anything but take their part, you know. Whatever may be thought, or fancied, or suspected of them by other people, I always stand by my own side, even assisting them to the utmost of my power."

"You mean," whispered Gerard desperately, "that you will warn the Van Santens that there is a detective here?"

She turned upon him sharply.

"Indeed I shall do nothing of the kind; there's no need. Your friend has behaved absurdly, and what he has done doesn't make the least difference. How should we mind who sees us, since we have nothing to hide?"

"I wish you would not associate yourself with these Americans," said Gerard irritably. "I know very well that you have nothing to hide, but I believe that the case is different with them. If you believe in them really, honestly believe in them and trust them to deal honorably, as you say you do, I want you to give me an understanding, a promise."

"Well, what is it?"

"Will you promise — swear — that you will not tell the Van Santens what I have just told you?"

She at once said, in a low voice, but firmly and resolutely —

"I swear that I will not tell anyone here what you have just told me — about the presence of a detective."

Gerard was surprised at this readiness to give her oath, and indeed his doubts made him shudder. Was she perjuring herself? He had had so many doubts of her before, that he ought not to have felt so strongly about this fresh one. But yet he shuddered

again at the thought that she could be committing a crime, just as he had done before.

Anxious to avoid the thought that she had sworn with no intention of keeping her oath, he asked himself whether her telling them would be useless, and they perhaps knew already the news he had imparted to her. There was another short pause, and then Miss Davison said to him quickly, as she put her hand on the window, as if to go indoors —

"There's one warning I ought to give you. As I have told you, it doesn't matter a bit who is present, because there is nothing to find out, and the play to-day will be just as it has always been. But if you want to prevent an unpleasant scene, you had better keep the warning you have given me to yourself, and not tell Arthur Aldington."

"Why not?"

"Because if you do, he will tell Cora Van Santen, and she will be indignant, and will certainly speak her mind openly about it, and there will be an explosion of wrath, and explanations, and inquiries, and the party will be broken up, and perhaps the detective himself found out, exposed, and thrown out of the house, and a fresh scandal will be made, just as we have got rid of the old one."

Gerard thought this very good advice, though he was surprised that she should give it. He readily agreed not to say anything to Arthur about the presence of the detective, and went indoors with her just

in time to see the arrival of a batch of visitors, among whom he saw the man Cecil Jones, whom he believed to be a decoy of the Van Santens.

This belief was strengthened when he found that Jones was in a jubilant and boastful mood, and that he was telling the other visitors that he had come prepared to beat Denver Van Santen at poker, having provided himself with money enough to bluff him to any extent he liked.

It seemed to Gerard that no man would have talked like this, doing his best to invite the attentions of the spoiler, after the scene of the preceding Sunday, which must certainly have been talked about by all the habitués of the Priory, unless he was an absolute fool. And in spite of his sheepish looks and gentle manners, Gerard had reason to believe that Cecil Jones was by no means so silly as he looked.

Miss Davison was not the woman to have foolish friends; and that Cecil Jones was the friend he had seen her with on more than one occasion previous to his visits to the Priory he was quite sure.

Gerard decided, therefore, that Jones, in his character of decoy to the rest of the pigeons whom the Van Santens plucked, had been allotted this rôle of careless and wealthy spendthrift in order to prove that, in spite of the scene of the preceding Sunday, the confidence of the visitors in the integrity of the Americans was as great as ever.

Gerard was annoyed at this scheme and he took

care to show Cecil Jones that he did not believe in his bluff.

"You were not here last Sunday, I think?" he said dryly; "but no doubt you heard what took place here?"

"I did hear about it, of course," said Jones, raising his voice, so that he could be heard by the rest of the people in the music-room, where they were standing; "but I shouldn't think of taking the word of a man like Sir William Gurdon against that of people I know and like."

"Why not?"

"Well, everyone knows what he is, a fellow who is getting through his money as fast as he can, and who is as careless with his tongue as he is with his cash," replied Jones. "I suppose you think," he went on rather aggressively, "that, after last Sunday, nobody ought to play anything but bagatelle and dominoes with the Van Santens. You look upon me as a fool to risk my money?"

"Oh no, I don't," said Gerard quietly; "because I know you won't risk much."

Although Gerard took care to keep his voice as low as that of Jones was loud, Cora and Arthur, who were, as usual, at the piano together, were so intently interested in the discussion that they contrived to hear these words, and they exchanged looks.

Cora was flushed and angry. She rose from her seat at the piano and said quickly —

"Why did you come here to-day, Mr. Buckland, if you believed the infamous things Sir William Gurdon said, things, by the way, that he has apologized most humbly for?"

"I don't think I could have given a better proof that I took the right side in the argument than by appearing here to-day, Miss Cora," retorted Gerard diplomatically.

Even while he spoke to her, he had his eye on Cecil Jones, who had at once profited by Gerard's turning away to follow Miss Davison into the adjoining room.

Cora being perforce content with this neat reply, Gerard managed to escape, and went into the middle room, where Mrs. Van Santen was pouring out tea. He thought what a strange contrast she made, in her simple gown, her black mittens, and the old-fashioned brooch and hair bracelets which she persisted in wearing, with the elegantly gowned daughters whose taste in dress excited the admiration of the men visitors, and the envy of the women.

Her quiet, old-fashioned, almost abrupt manner, too, was a relief after the artificiality of some of the other visitors, and Gerard wondered how she had managed so soon to get over the terrible shock of the preceding Sunday. He would have thought, knowing the simplicity of the old lady, that the bare suggestion of anything unfair in connection with her household would have been enough to make her

shut up the house, and return in dudgeon to America with her daughters.

But she seemed to be in the same mood of placid good spirits as usual; and he supposed that her sons had known how, by getting hold of her by her weak side, to smooth over the trouble, and to persuade her that the unpleasant affair was only a passing cloud, such as would never darken their atmosphere again.

Close beside her he found, among others, Cecil Jones and Miss Davison. He could see that, although they said little to each other, there was some secret understanding between the two, and he was maddened at the thought that she had already broken her oath, and that she was using Jones as a go-between to carry to the Van Santens her knowledge that there would be a detective in the house that day to watch their proceedings.

Gerard would fain have believed such an artful evasion of her oath impossible to Miss Davison, but in the face of all that he suspected this was scarcely credible.

But even at that moment the thought which troubled him the most was that Rachel cared for Cecil Jones, that he was more than an accomplice, more than a friend, that he was her confidant, and her lover.

Nay, the thought darted into his mind with a most poignant rush that perhaps he might be her husband,

and that, if not, he was probably already her fiancé.

On that point he thought that she might perhaps be more candid than upon the other, if taxed, and at the first opportunity he followed her into the corner of the room where she had seated herself, in sight of the nearest card-table in the end room, on the one hand, and of the figure of Cora seated at the piano, on the other.

There was a seat near her, and he stood with one knee on it, as he bent down and asked —

"Will you answer me a question truly, honestly, Rachel, a question about yourself — and — someone else?"

"I can't promise," said she, in a low voice, with, as he thought, a quick, self-conscious glance towards Cecil Jones.

From the adjoining room, where Denver and some other men were playing cards, came a reminder, in Denver's voice, of the other man of whom he had been jealous, but whose chances Gerard now rejected, as he could not believe that Miss Davison could have given her heart to a card-sharper, who was also something worse.

"I want to know whether this Jones is engaged to you?"

A faint smile passed over her face, one of those flitting, quickly fading ripples of gentle merriment which were characteristic of her.

"Why," she said, "how many more people are you

going to marry me to, Mr. Buckland? There was Denver Van Santen — and now —"

He interrupted her with rash eagerness.

"Denver Van Santen! No. Even if you could care for a card-sharper, which I own might be possible, you could not, I'm sure, care for a murderer!"

Miss Davison, who was leaning back carelessly in her chair, sat up, looking deadly pale. With a commanding air, she made him sit down beside her.

"What do you mean?" she asked, fixing him with a gaze which seemed to penetrate to his very soul. It was evident that, however she might try to hide the fact, she was thrown by his words into a state of keenest tension.

His jealousy grew as he watched the change in her. Did she really care for this man, then, and was the tie which bound her to Cecil Jones one of business interests only?

"I mean," said he, lowering his voice, so that no one else should hear a whisper of the momentous words he had to utter, "that Denver Van Santen was the cause of the accident to Sir William's car last week, and that he shadowed us with a revolver, with what object, unless he meant to rid himself of a person whom he looked upon as dangerous, I can't imagine."

Miss Davison tried to laugh, but that resource she had used too often that afternoon and her voice sounded hard and her mirth artificial.

"How absurd!" she cried. "Can anything be more preposterous than to accuse a person on such flimsy grounds? for of course you only suppose that you saw Denver, and Sir William only supposes it also."

He saw, however, in her eyes, as she uttered the words, that she felt by no means so certain as she pretended to be of the childlike innocence of the young poker-player.

"We do more than suppose," he said quietly; "we are both quite sure of what we saw."

She was silent for a moment. Then her eyes stole a stealthy glance at the card-playing party in the next room. Gerard watched her, and said —

"I have told you why I don't believe you can care for Denver Van Santen. I want to know whether you care for the other fellow."

She turned to him with a scoffing air.

"How on earth can it matter to you for whom I care, Mr. Buckland, when you look upon me as an accomplice of card-sharpers?" she asked lightly.

"I don't know why I do care," he replied desperately, "except that you are such an enigma that every detail concerning you is of surpassing interest to me. I don't understand you. I believe it's difficult to understand any woman; but certainly I never believed it until I met you. But it seems to me that you unite in your own person all the puzzling attributes of all the women who ever lived. The con-

sequence is that I adore you at one moment, I hate you the next. One day I believe that all my suspicions of you are flimsy and groundless, and that I only want the key to solve the mystery which will show you to be all I want to believe you; the next day I can see in you only a malignant enchantress, charming men to their undoing, without heart and without conscience."

"I've told you to believe that last description to be true, haven't I?"

"But I can't — I won't. Rachel, when I spoke to you before about my feeling for you, you promised to ask to be set free."

"And I did ask — as I wrote you — and was refused. Don't begin the old argument again. It is of no use. You shouldn't have come here to-day — you shouldn't have come here at all. It is all pain, nothing but pain and distress that you give yourself and me by coming. Mr. Buckland, be warned by me. This is not the place where women — or men, either — are seen at their best. I don't mean that there is any harm in what we do, but the atmosphere is not good, not wholesome. Take my advice: say good-bye to me now, and go back to town, and don't come here again. As I've told you, my way and yours lie far apart; there is no advantage in pretending not to know it. Now, will you be good, and wish me good-bye, and find you have an appointment in town that takes you back early?"

The lights had been turned up, and Gerard knew that old Mrs. Van Santen, from her corner of the room near the tea-table, was watching him and Miss Davison. These two were sitting close by the curtains of the wide window, partly hidden by one of them, indeed, though not sufficiently for the old lady not to be able to see that something very interesting was the subject of their conversation.

Gerard felt her eyes upon him, even when he was not looking at her; and presently, even while he was so much occupied with Rachel, he saw the old lady beckon Delia to her, and speak to her hurriedly, in a low voice.

In the meantime he turned to Miss Davison and answered her question after a short pause.

"I won't distress you by arguing in the old way again," he said. "But I can't take your advice about going back to town immediately, though I know your counsel is good. I want to see it out."

"To see what out?"

Miss Davison's eyes were attracted too, by this time, in the direction of the old lady and Delia.

Gerard hesitated.

"Well, shall we say the sequel to last Sunday's scene?"

At that Miss Davison remained quite silent for some moments, with her eyes cast down, and her hands lying immovable in her lap.

"I don't understand," she said at last.

He had no time to explain before Mrs. Van Santen, rising from her chair, crossed the room, taking such a course that she came quite close to the two young people. Gerard therefore, did not speak until he had watched the old lady go into the card-room, where he saw her standing close to Denver, without being able to hear whether she spoke to him.

In the meantime Delia came strolling across to the window, and rearranged a curtain which had been pulled away from its proper folds by a chair placed near it.

It was out of the question, therefore, for Gerard to give Miss Davison any explanation of his rather momentous words while members of the Van Santen family were flitting about so close to them. And before Delia had moved away, Denver Van Santen, quitting the card-table, came up, and unceremoniously drawing a chair close to Miss Davison, leaned forward and looked sentimentally into her face.

"Guess I'm not going to let that fellow have you all to himself this evening, Miss Davison," said he.

And, as Rachel received this speech with an encouraging smile, instead of snubbing the fellow, as he felt that she ought to do, Gerard had nothing to do but to withdraw and leave the Yankee in full and undisputed possession of the field.

CHAPTER XXII

Now although it had seemed to Gerard, when he first arrived at the Priory that afternoon, that all was as usual there, he had long before this discovered that this was by no means the case.

Everything did indeed look as it had looked on his previous visits. The visitors were quite as numerous, the conversation was quite as lively. The groups moved about from room to room, listened to the music at one end of the suite, played cards at the other, and drank tea between the two, with just the same appearance of having nothing on their minds but the amusement of the moment.

The Van Santens, on their side, behaved exactly as they had always behaved; the young men played bridge and poker, with intervals of conversation and laughter with those of their guests who did not care for cards. Cora sang as sweetly as ever, was just as charming when, instead of singing or playing, she was listening to Arthur's impassioned speeches, or lisping out her little crisp sentences by way of her share in the general conversation.

Delia, as usual, flitted from group to group, never in the same place long, and always bringing with her

a sense of repose and ease, the result of the singularly tactful and neat way she had of setting things right when they were going wrong.

Mrs. Van Santen, perhaps, showed traces of the emotion which the unpleasant scene of the preceding Sunday had caused her. She was sensible enough, dear old soul, not to disturb the general harmony by any open allusion to the trouble on that occasion, or by any appearance of anxiety about the present. But she did not look quite so peaceful, quite so serene, as she had looked before, and Gerard was quite sure that she was keeping a watchful eye on her card-playing sons, lest any more disturbances should break the peace of her family and her guests.

But underneath all this surface appearance of calm and pleasure Gerard was now conscious that there was a current of anxiety, a subdued unrest, which infected the whole of the Van Santen family, and had spread, perhaps without their being fully aware of it, to their guests.

It was easily explained, of course, by the occurrences of the preceding Sunday, by the inevitable self-consciousness which they had produced in everybody; so that the visitors felt impelled to be more sprightly and more at ease than usual, and the family, on their side, had to keep up an air of having absolutely forgotten the ill-mannered attack made upon one of them by the hasty and impetuous Sir William.

Thus the general atmosphere seemed to be electric,

charged with a sort of vague danger, and conducive to excitement and unrest.

When Gerard found himself ousted by Denver, he retreated to the music-room, and there he found Arthur and Cora, no longer at the piano, but conversing with intense seriousness in a corner of the room. He had scarcely entered, when Mrs. Van Santen came in, noiselessly, but wearing a look of unusual excitement in her good old face. She went straight to Cora, said a few words to her in an undertone, and went back again into the next room.

Then Cora spoke to Arthur, and he, after a few minutes' earnest conversation with her, sauntered across the room to Gerard.

"It seems," he said, "that the Van Santens are rather surprised to see you here to-day. They had an idea, I think, that you took the part of Sir William Gurdon against them."

By a rapid process of thought, Gerard knew how this idea had arisen in their minds. He had left the Priory by himself on the preceding Sunday, and had only met Sir William afterwards. As he had expressed no opinion favorable to Sir William's cause previous to that, but as he had, on the contrary, done his best to persuade the baronet that he had made a mistake, it was clear that Cora's idea could not be based on what she had then seen and heard.

It was because Denver had followed Sir William, having injured the tire of his car in order to bring

him to a standstill, and because he had then discovered Gerard in the baronet's company, and the family understood him to be on the side of the enemy.

He was careful, however, to give no hint of what he knew to Arthur when he was thus accused of siding with the baronet.

"Surprised to see me, are they?" said he. "Do you mean that they wish me to withdraw?"

"No, no, oh no, of course not," said Arthur hastily. "But they want to understand how it is that you have changed your mind about that? And whether you have seen Sir William since?"

Gerard perceived that Cora had sent her obedient slave, Arthur, to try to "pump" him as to his position and intentions. It was part of the general uneasiness that he had noticed that they wanted to know precisely the attitude taken up by each of their visitors. And Gerard knew that he was especially under observation, on account of his known admiration for Miss Davison and Denver's possible jealousy, as well as because he was now known to have been the cause of the miscarriage of Denver's projected attack upon Sir William.

Although neither he nor the baronet could have sworn to the identity of the figure, which had shadowed them and which they had then pursued, with Denver Van Santen, or of the fact that he had been

armed, there was very little doubt in the minds of either upon those points.

Knowing that his answer would be faithfully reported, Gerard answered with caution —

"Seen Sir William! Oh yes, I went up to town with him last Sunday. We started in his car, but had a breakdown and went back by train."

"And did you persuade him to think better of his disgraceful conduct?"

"I persuaded him — or rather, I helped to persuade him — to write an apology to Mrs. Van Santen."

"And you quite see that he made a fool of himself?"

Gerard hesitated.

"I don't think his conduct was very wise," he admitted at last.

"Or that he was justified in bringing such an accusation?"

"I think, if he thought what he did, it would have been better to talk things over with his own friends before making a scene."

This answer was not at all what Arthur wanted. It made him uneasy.

"Surely you don't think there was anything in it? I can't think you would be here to-day if you had thought there was!"

"Well, we needn't discuss that now. It's a sub-

ject we should be bound to get warm over, whatever we thought, isn't it?" said he soothingly.

"It certainly makes me warm to hear a doubt cast upon my friends."

"No doubt has been cast on anybody by me," replied Gerard quickly. "If they want to know, you can tell them so."

Arthur went away, evidently not quite satisfied, and Gerard strolled through the adjoining room into the card-room at the end of the suite.

There had been changes in the position of affairs during the short interval since he left Miss Davison conversing with Denver in the middle room.

Rachel herself had disappeared, and he learned from Delia, who, in the course of her pacifying errands, met him and asked him whether he was going to play bridge, that she had gone upstairs with a headache.

This statement was received by Gerard with certain vague suspicions.

He entered the card-room, and found play in full swing at four different tables. As usual, Harry Van Santen was playing bridge, and Denver was having his usual luck at poker.

The table at which he sat was the nearest to the door communicating with the adjoining room, and it was also the nearest to the window, which was closed and hidden behind the drawn curtains.

Cecil Jones formed one of the poker party, and

he was being eased of the money of which he had boasted.

But Gerard, who had now had time to consider his face well, was surprised to note in his usually sheepish face something which made him quite sure that there was some mystery about this friend of Miss Davisons. He had suspected it before, but he was now sure of it. Not only was there under his expression of surface silliness an occasional look which showed intelligence of a quite unusual kind, but there was to-day in his manner a certain quiet watchfulness, which made Gerard think he was lying in wait for something.

What that something was — whether a signal from one of the Van Santens, or a scene, or a signal from somebody else and another sort of scene — he could not be sure. But that there was trouble of some kind in the air he knew quite well.

He almost thought, indeed, as he watched Cecil Jones from the doorway, and saw him losing his money with little silly exclamations of impatience or surprise, that the man appeared to be listening for something.

Once or twice he glanced in the direction of the window, although, as it was closed and curtained, he could see nothing whatever of it.

He lost more and more heavily as time went on, and bore his losses with wonderful equanimity.

But when play had gone on for some time, and

while he was being steadily eased of his money, Gerard heard a soft rustling sound behind him, and turning quickly saw that old Mrs. Van Santen was standing at his elbow, with a look of indescribable terror and distress upon her face. It seemed to him that she was watching Cecil Jones as if he had been, not the innocent idiot he looked, or the confederate which Gerard had till that day believed him to be of her sons, but some harbinger of evil, some messenger of adverse fate.

And in a moment the last rag of suspicion that Jones could be a decoy and a partner in the Van Santen operations fled from Gerard's mind.

The game went on, meanwhile, although it seemed to him that the old lady would fain have stopped it. She even made an attempt to catch Denver's eye, and partially succeeded at last. But he only made her an abrupt sign to withdraw, and went on with the congenial task of winning from the placid Jones the money which he had so openly boasted of having brought with him.

At a sign from her son, Mrs. Van Santen suddenly disappeared, and Gerard saw her no more for some time, and wondered whether she had retired to "have a good cry" over her son's gambling propensities, and the troubles which she perhaps foresaw for him in consequence.

Gerard, who was quite sure in his own mind that

Cecil Jones was being robbed, and that he was aware of the fact, found himself growing more and more excited, as he waited, in a state of extreme nerve-tension, for the crisis which he felt must be approaching.

The sounds of voices, of movements, became dull and confused in his mind; the figures of the players became blurred, and a sort of singing in his ears warned him that he had better find relief to his intense excitement in the open air, when suddenly, just as he was turning to go towards the French window of the middle room, there was a sound like the hissing of a serpent, followed immediately by the overthrow of half a dozen chairs, and turning, he saw that, as he had foreseen, the crisis had come.

Cecil Jones, leaning across the card-table, had seized Denver's arm, and dragged out from the sleeve of the American a card, which he flung down, face upwards, upon the table.

Leaning across the table, and looking up steadily into the face of the baffled Denver, who had sprung up from his chair, and was standing, still in the grip of Jones, pale with rage and discomfiture, Jones said, in a quiet voice that carried clearly to every corner of the room and into that beyond —

"I thought so. You are a card-sharper!"

In an instant there was an uproar in the room.

The men who had been playing at the same table

with Denver and Jones were on their feet already, exclaiming, protesting, uttering indignant exclamations.

There was now a rush from the other tables, and Harry Van Santen led the crowd that gathered round the detected cheat.

Harry, with a very white face, uttered a harsh laugh which was meant to be reassuring, but which was hollow, hideous, unreal, and horrible to hear.

"What's this?" he cried. "It's a trick, a silly trick that some of you have played upon my brother! Who is it? You, Jones? Come, speak up and own to it like a man."

Hard as was his forced laughter, the manner of the older American was so assured, his voice was so deep and so confident, that one or two of the men present seemed at first inclined to believe that the version of the affair which he was trying to maintain was the true one.

But Cecil Jones suddenly sprang up from his sprawling attitude, and stood erect.

"Gentlemen," he said, addressing, conspicuously, not the two Americans, but the rest of the company, "there has been systematic cheating carried on here, as some of you might have guessed, I should think. Don't be alarmed. There is nothing to be feared except by the men who have robbed you."

The uproar of voices, excited, indignant, which

had ceased when he began to speak, rose again when he left off.

In the midst of it, there was a shrill scream, and Mrs. Van Santen, looking, not the dear, simple old lady they were all used to, but a very virago, with flaming eyes and harsh voice, cried, addressing Harry and Denver —

"You can't get away. The house is surrounded!"

CHAPTER XXIII

Something in the altered appearance of Mrs. Van Santen, as she came in with resolute air and addressed her sons in a harsh, strident voice, revealed to Gerard, as by a flash of inspiration, some of the truth respecting her.

That is to say, he recognized that he had been deceived in her; that the gentle, amiable, simple old lady, with her primitive dress and air of surprise at her new surroundings was a fraud; that, far from being the innocent old lady she appeared to be, grateful for the recognition of her smart English friends, and amazed at the position in which she found herself in that English society which she had been taught to consider stiff and exclusive, Mrs. Van Santen was in truth a very keen-eyed woman, who understood thoroughly that British idiosyncrasy of being exclusive to its own countrymen, but over-ready to receive foreigners at their own valuation; that she had been quick to avail herself of it, and to do all in her power to assist her family towards a good position in English society, by a very clever affectation of humility and simplicity combined, which had disarmed while it charmed.

The old woman advanced into the card-room, and, looking around her with eyes which were keen and sharp and penetrating, said, in an undertone —

"Where's that Davison girl? I believe it's she who is at the bottom of this!"

In the turmoil which had succeeded to the dead silence with which her first announcement that the house was surrounded was received, Mrs. Van Santen was the coolest person in the room.

Denver had leaped to the window with an oath, had looked out into the garden from the shelter of the curtains, and had drawn back again, with his fresh color gone, and the look of a hunted animal in his handsome eyes.

Harry, on the other hand, had begun to busy himself in hastily collecting not only the cards which were lying on the table, but the money as well. In this latter occupation, however, he was stopped by Cecil Jones, who, having kept a keen eye on all that happened after his first unmasking of Denver, noted Harry's occupation, and at once checked him in it.

"You had better leave the stakes alone," said he quietly. "They are not yours, you know."

Harry Van Santen showed fewer signs of emotion than his brother had done. On being thus challenged, he just shrugged his shoulders, raised his eyebrows, and withdrawing from the group that was clamoring round the tables, sat down in a corner, with his face to the back of his chair, and leaned down upon his

arms, biting his nails and keeping his eyes down.

It flashed through Gerard's mind as he looked at him that he must have been through similar scenes before, that he knew it was best to take things quietly, and to lie in wait for a chance to escape.

Meanwhile Denver was blustering, assuring his guests that there was no need to be uneasy, that an ugly trick was being played upon them, and that, if the ladies would retire, he and the other men would find out who were the authors of this fresh outrage, and would soon set matters right.

Of this advice, however, no notice was taken. There were several ladies present, but they were all what Denver himself irreverently spoke of as "old stagers," women of rank or social position established enough not to be daunted by the prospect of another "row," and old enough to know that the quieter they were the better were their own chances of getting out of the ugly affair with dignity.

All, moreover, were curious as to the issue of this business; and though one lady affected to be on the verge of hysterics, as nobody was at leisure to take any notice of her, she speedily recovered sufficiently to take the same interest as the rest in what was going on.

For events now began to move fast.

Someone said "Hush!" and then all became aware that there were voices and footsteps to be heard outside the house. One man went behind the curtains to

look out, and came back with a serious expression of face, to confirm Mrs. Van Santen's sensational statement.

The house *was* surrounded, and they were all virtually in custody.

Not one of the people assembled, with the exception of old Mrs. Van Santen, made an attempt to leave the room. She crossed the room with amazing rapidity for one of her years, but finding that someone had locked the door, she turned back again, and stood with a fierce look on her face, but without speaking, with her back to the door, watching for the crisis.

Then there was a rattle and a rush in the next room, and a female voice, which they believed to be Cora's, uttered a slight scream.

Then two policemen in uniform came into the room, and the foremost came up to the table and looked round.

Before he could speak, Cecil Jones, from the opposite side of the table, addressed him —

"There are five of them," he said, "two men and three women. Three out of the five are in this room, the other two are, I believe, in those two rooms adjoining," and he pointed to the other drawing-rooms. "These are the two men." He pointedly rapidly to Denver and Harry Van Santen, and then, turning, indicated Mrs. Van Santen, as he added: "And this is the head of them all."

While he was speaking three or four more men had come quietly into the room, and by the time he had ended both. Denver and Harry Van Santen found themselves practically prisoners, each having a constable in uniform on either side of him.

Cecil's Jones's concluding words had created a sort of subdued hubbub in the room. The amazement with which the onlookers learned that the dear old lady, whom they had all condescendingly pitied and rather liked, was the head of a gang of swindlers caused a new and strange excitement to ferment in the room.

They looked at each other, they looked at Mrs. Van Santen, and were shocked to see in her usually mild eyes the ferocity of a wild beast at bay, as two constables came up to her, and, without attempting to touch her, kept her between them and stood on the watch one on each side.

"Mrs. Van Santen! Isn't it a mistake?" whispered some of the ladies present. But the voice of Cecil Jones cut short the whispers.

"That is Catherine Burge, the woman who did fourteen years for insurance frauds," was the answer which Jones gave to a man who was remonstrating against the indignity offered to the old lady.

A murmur of dismay ran through the room, and passed on to the next, where all the rest of the guests were congregated in an eager group close to the door of the card-room.

Arthur was in the middle of this group, and beside him was Cora Van Santen, the woman whom he looked upon as the loveliest and sweetest in the world.

Cora was deathly pale, and her teeth were tightly set and her slender hands were clenched; but she had not said one word after the scream she had given when the police entered the house.

Now, however, she suddenly asked a question. As half a dozen more constables came in single file into the room in which she was, entering by way of the French window, and at once taking up a position behind the group in the doorway, she said to Arthur, in a fierce undertone —

"Who let them in?"

"I don't know," said Arthur, who felt sick and cold with excitement and the dread of hearing something which would reflect upon the woman he admired.

Delia, who was also in the group, and who heard these words asked and answered, turned round and laughed harshly. She was looking altogether different from the charming, tactful, gracious creature who usually spent her time walking from one to another among the guests, smoothing the rough places and making herself popular with everyone.

"Can't you guess?" was all she said.

And then she turned her head disdainfully away again, and resumed her strenuous watch of the proceedings in the adjoining room.

By this time Cecil Jones had seen his orders carried

out in the card-room, had muttered a low-voiced apology to one of the guests, a sporting man of some social standing, whom he recognized, and had then advanced towards the group in the doorway. Looking carefully among them, he said, addressing the constables who were standing behind them —

"There are two more here. That's one of them," and he glanced at Delia. "And "— he turned again, —"there's the fifth and the last," and he indicated Cora.

Arthur was up in arms. Struck with consternation, he saw a constable beckoning to Cora to come out of the crowd which surrounded her. The girl, with a frightened scream, which contrasted strongly with the calmness shown by the others, tried to hide herself among the crowd. Arthur at once tried to place himself between her and the police, so that she might make her escape, as she appeared to wish to do, into the card-room.

But Cecil Jones was confronting her, and he smiled, and said gently —

"It's of no use, Mr. Aldington. You'd better advise the young lady to take things quietly. Especially as we shall do her but little harm."

Cora, however, instead of profiting by this advice, began to weep so violently, to utter so many hysterical protests that she "had had nothing to do with it, nothing whatever, that they told her it would be all right, and that they ought to confess it now,"

that Cecil Jones made a sign to two of the constables, who gently made their way through the group of guests, and taking the weeping girl by the arms, led her back into the middle room, with Arthur Aldington, protesting indignantly, in close attendance.

When once she was free from the pressure of the crowd, however, Cora suddenly resisted the attempts which they were about to make to lay her on the sofa, and springing upright, said —

"If you'll let me go I'll tell you everything I know. It isn't really very much, and I'm real sorry now I ever took up with these people. My engagement was to sing, that's all: one hundred and fifty dollars a day, and expenses. And I was to know nothing. Well, and I don't know anything, except that the police have come in. Now you'll let me go, won't you?"

"I don't suppose you'll be detained long, miss," said one of the men. "But as your name has been given us with the rest, we're bound to take you before the magistrate with them. It won't be more than a formal business as far as you're concerned, I daresay, if you can prove what you've told us."

"But I don't want to be taken off as if I were a criminal," said Cora plaintively. "It's not fair!"

"Let me be answerable for the lady's appearance at any time you may want her," said Arthur quickly.

But the ungrateful Cora turned upon him and stamped her foot.

"Oh, no," she said, "I'll not have you answerable for me. I'd rather go through it myself. I've had to be civil to everybody so long that now I must just speak out and freely say what's in my mind. Mr. Aldington, you're a fool. You might have known how things were going, as your friend Buckland did. He's made himself safe, and I respect him for it. He's taken care to be on the right side."

Arthur was stupefied by this rebuff. Retreating with a few muttered words, neither very coherent nor very intelligible, he turned and met Delia who had made no attempt to resist the constables, and who stood erect between two of them, with an air of boredom upon her handsome face.

"What will they do with us?" she asked Arthur quite simply. "Will we get the same as those men?"

"Do you mean your brothers?"

She glanced behind her with an air of superb disdain.

"Brothers?" she echoed, with much scorn. "Those fellows our brothers? No. And we aren't sisters, either, or daughters to that old woman. We're each on our own. And there's no credit in owning it, as I guess you folks know all about us, as much as we know ourselves."

Arthur was astounded.

She smiled at him scornfully.

"Well, we've had a good time!" she said at last, in a half-regretful tone. "You Britishers are mighty

easy to gull, aren't you? One has only got to call oneself a millionaire, to speak with an accent that wouldn't be tolerated on our side, and to give one's address as Chicago, and the best of you are ready to open your arms — and your pockets. So, if you're taken in now and then, it's not surprising."

"Then — aren't you — anything to do with — the millionaire?" gasped Arthur.

"Just wish we were!" replied Delia simply; "no such luck. We're just a mixed lot of adventurers and adventuresses, making a common cause to ease the pockets of your silly society folk, and to get ourselves a pleasant time. If it had only lasted a little longer," she added, with a sigh, "we'd each have landed a stock-broker or one of your wooden-headed baronets, and then we'd have been fixed up to rights!"

Arthur turned slowly to look at Cora. She had dried her eyes, and was sitting rather disconsolately on the sofa, while the constables who had charge of both these younger ladies remained at a moderate distance, satisfied that they had them both under observation.

A moment later, there was a movement in the group round the door which led to the card-room, and Mrs. Van Santen, closely guarded by two constables, came in. At the sight of the two girls, she ran forward and would have thrown herself on Delia's neck, with a smothered sob and a cry of "My daughter!" but Delia avoided her embrace and said shortly —

"Oh, we've had enough of this. We're going to tell the truth, all that we know. Our contract's ended now, and we must save ourselves."

Mrs. Van Santen at once became a changed woman. The sweet look of tenderness with which she had flown towards Delia altered to a hard expression of anger and resentment, as she stopped short and putting her head on one side, said —

"Say, have you given us all away, then?"

"No," answered Delia shortly. "You have to thank those two card-sharpers in there for doing that."

"Do you mean my sons?"

"No, you haven't any sons," retorted Delia, who seemed to take a sort of calm delight in making her confession as complete and as public as possible. "Those two men whom you call your sons are no more children of yours than they are brothers of ours. They're just a pair of swindlers who don't know how to swindle without being found out."

She made this statement calmly, in a high, clear voice, not without a rather cleverly devised intention of being heard and applauded by the people present, including the police.

She was old enough to know that her share and that of the singing girl Cora, having been entirely passive and showy, rather than actively useful in the swindling practices carried on by their male confederates, the punishment in store for them could not be on the

same plane as that earned by the men themselves.

And as for Mrs. Van Santen, why, she was old enough and experienced enough to look out for herself.

But this sudden change in the attitude of her adopted family seemed for a time to disconcert the old woman, who stared from Delia to Cora and back again with an air of uncertainty as to what course she should pursue in the circumstances. Before long, however, she recovered herself, and, turning to the policeman who walked beside her and who appeared more vigilant than those who were looking after the younger women, she said, in a hard voice —

"Well, you've got to prove that there's anything wrong in adopting and providing for three or four young creatures who are not your own children by birth; and that's the worst thing you can accuse me of, anyhow."

"Nobody has accused you of anything, ma'am," said one of the officers. "And you'd best not say anything more, else it may be used against you presently."

But Mrs. Van Santen, alias Catherine Burge, laughed in his face.

"You needn't tell me that," she said. "I've had some dealings with your sort before, as some of you know. I don't deny it. But that has nothing to do with my conduct now, and I tell you there's nothing to be proved against me but too large a heart."

"Well, ma'am, you confine yourself to proving that when you're before the magistrates, and you won't come to much harm if you succeed."

But in spite of the purity of her intentions, the old lady did not look quite satisfied on this point. And Gerard Buckland, when he came out of the card-room a minute later in search of Miss Davison, saw that his gentle old New Englander had been transformed into a hard-featured virago who glared at him with a suspicious eye.

The sight of him roused the savage slumbering in her breast. She even made a half attempt to rush towards him, but a movement on the part of the nearest policeman made her pause.

"I know who you're looking for, Mr. Gerard Buckland," she said. "And I wish I knew myself where to find her. She'd not leave this house with her demure face unscratched if I could!"

Gerard, who had begun to make a shrewd guess as to the reason of Miss Davison's disappearance, knew better than to attempt to dispute with the angry woman.

He looked at Arthur Aldington, with a questioning upraising of the eyebrows, which the other rightly understood to be an invitation to accompany him on his departure.

Arthur, still unwilling to leave Cora, who meanwhile had ungratefully turned her back upon him and

was sitting close to Delia on the sofa, talking to her in a low voice, coughed to attract the attention of the girl who had enchanted him.

Cora looked carelessly over her shoulder.

"Isn't there anything I can do for you?" he asked in a low, hoarse voice.

"Nothing whatever, thank you," she replied coldly. "I've done with all of you. I've had to be civil long enough; now I can be natural, and — good-bye."

She held out her hand quite abruptly and coldly.

He took it, held it for a moment in fingers that trembled, and then, dropping it with just one reproachful look at her, would almost have staggered as he went away, but for Gerard, who took him by the arm, and led him to the inner door.

It was locked.

"May we go out?" asked Gerard of the nearest policeman.

There was a pause, and the man went into the next room to consult Cecil Jones, came back with the key of the door, opened it, and silently let the two young men into the hall.

Here a couple of frightened maid-servants and a sullen footman were sitting on the stairs, discussing the amazing situation.

"Has Miss Davison gone away?" asked Gerard of one of them.

But she only shook her head, and, looking horribly

alarmed, told him that she knew nothing, and that they had been warned not to say anything to anybody except the police.

With which discomfiting information the two young men had to be content, as they went out of the Priory for the last time.

CHAPTER XXIV, AND LAST

They walked in silence down the drive, with that sinking of the heart inevitable when a pleasant time comes suddenly to an end. But there was more than this to trouble them both. The thoughts of the young men were with the girls who had enchanted them. Arthur was pondering, with the deepest pain, the terrible awakening he had had only a short time before, from the dream that he had found a pearl among women, a very queen of girls.

He had made up his mind to take courage, and to ask Cora to be his wife, although he was afraid that his own prospects, good as they were, might not seem golden enough to tempt the parents of the sweet-voiced Cora to yield their consent to his wooing.

But of Cora herself he had entertained no doubts. And to find that the charms which had fascinated him, the bright wit which had amused him, had been merely part of the stock-in-trade of one of a party of adventurers, bent on making a good thing out of British credulity while their time of prosperity lasted, was such a shock that it left him dazed, unable to think or to understand.

Gerard, on his side, though he was not suffering, like his friend, from a great disillusion, was in a state of terrible anxiety.

Where was Rachel? Had she compromised herself with these adventurers? And had she alone of them all had the cleverness to escape the net laid for their feet by the police?

Or was she, as he thought much more probable, the accomplice of Cecil Jones, and his assistant in bringing the Americans to justice?

Neither possibility was pleasant to contemplate. If she were one of the friends of these Americans, even though she might extricate herself from all suspicion of being concerned in their misdoings, she could not fail to be dragged into a most unpleasant case, the publicity of which might perhaps offend, if not alienate, her best friends.

If, on the other hand, as seemed much more probable, she should prove to have been the accomplice of Cecil Jones, it was distasteful to contemplate her having assisted in exposing the people who passed as her friends and who gave her the shelter of their roof.

On the whole, therefore, it was in a state of considerable perplexity and distress that Gerard accompanied his friend down the drive, and turned into the road.

Both young men had come down by train, and it

was towards the station that they were wending their way, when they saw a little way in front of them the bright lights of a motor-car.

Expecting to find that it and its occupants had some connection with the police surprise at the Priory, Gerard and Arthur walked quickly up to it and perceived that the man in a big overcoat, who was standing beside it, was no other than Cecil Jones.

"Ah!" said he, making a gesture with his hand to stop them, "here he comes!"

The young men, rather disconcerted, stopped and looked at him aggressively. They felt that upon his shoulders lay the burden of the brusque manner in which the crisis at the Priory had taken place.

"You are from Scotland Yard, I suppose?" said Gerard stiffly.

Jones nodded with a genial smile. But it was strange how that smile of his, which used to seem so imbecile and irritating when they had taken him for a fool, or an amiable decoy, seemed to have grown astute and intelligent now that they knew him for what he was, a detective of remarkably well developed histrionic powers and the keenest of keen eyes.

Jones nodded.

Gerard glanced at the car, and Jones stepped back.

"There's someone you know inside," he said with a dry smile.

He was gently, mildly triumphant, satisfied with having brought off a coup which would redound greatly to his credit.

Gerard guessed whom he should see as he stepped up to the side of the car. And, just as he had expected, he saw Miss Davison inside, leaning back in one corner, with her eyes closed, and a look of weariness that was almost pain upon her handsome, pale face.

But it was the sight of the man seated beside her which caused Gerard to utter an exclamation, and to look in stupefaction from Rachel to him and from him to Cecil Jones.

For, sitting in the car beside Miss Davison, wrapped in a fur-lined motor-coat and with a cap drawn well down over his eyes, was the distinguished-looking man with the white mustache whom Gerard had been accustomed to look upon as her evil genius.

"Let me introduce Mr. Buckland, Colonel," said Cecil Jones, as he came up to the side of the car and leaned upon the door.

But at the name Miss Davison sat up, and leaning towards the man by her side, whispered loud enough for Gerard to hear —

"Oh, uncle, I may tell him now, may I not?"

Some inkling of the truth, the whole truth, was already beginning to glimmer in Gerard's brain, but he was not to know all just yet.

The man with the white mustache shook his head,

whispered something back, and then said aloud, holding out his hand to Gerard —

"I'm very pleased to meet you, Mr. Buckland. I've heard a great deal about you from my niece. But I ought to introduce myself. My name is Ormsby, Colonel Ormsby."

Gerard could scarcely refrain from uttering a cry. For he had suddenly remembered that the face of the man with the white mustache, which had roused faint recollections which he could not fix in his mind, was that of a certain gallant officer who had been made chief constable of one of the large provincial towns, and who had distinguished himself not many years before in an important criminal case which was still in the public mind.

Further glimmerings as to Miss Davison's position began to appear in Gerard's mind.

Meanwhile Cecil Jones had said a few words in a low voice to the colonel, and raising his hat to the lady, had walked back towards the Priory at a brisk pace, accompanied by another man who had remained quietly in the background during the few minutes that this introduction lasted.

The colonel asked the two young men whether they would go back to town, and on receiving their thanks, he made way for them to enter the car, which immediately started on its journey.

Very little was said by anybody until town was reached.

Miss Davison, who seemed thoroughly exhausted, scarcely opened her eyes, but sat back in her corner, from time to time inhaling the contents of a bottle of lavender salts which she held in her hand.

The colonel sat next to her, and Gerard on the outer side, while Arthur Aldington occupied the seat beside the driver.

It was a very long time before Colonel Ormsby said anything about the affair at the Priory. But just as they were driving through the outskirts of London, and Miss Davison was rousing herself and putting up her hands to rearrange her hat, he whispered in the young man's ear —

"You've been present to-day at the capture of one of the most dangerous card-sharping and blackmailings gangs in Europe. They'll each get seven years."

"Blackmailing?" echoed Gerard, horrorstruck.

The colonel nodded.

"They hadn't begun that game over here yet, but they wouldn't have been long in starting, if they hadn't been laid by the heels. That old woman is the author of more mischief than would suffice to keep half a dozen criminal courts busy."

Gerard uttered an exclamation of surprise.

"But the name — isn't she Mrs. Van Santen?" he asked appalled.

"No. There is a Mrs. Van Santen, who lives in an

out-of-the-way town in the States, and whose husband has made his pile in railway stocks; but she has nothing to do with them, nor have the other members of the gang. Each has a different surname or, rather, a dozen."

"And the women — the others?"

"I don't know anything of the one who calls herself Delia; but there is probably a history behind her good-looking mask. The other is a public singer — married —"

"Married?" echoed Gerard.

"Yes — husband in America, or was. She may now be the wife of the man who calls himself Harry Van Santen. He's a precious scoundrel, the worse of the two, if anything."

Gerard was appalled. The thought that Miss Davison had been living under the same roof with these dangerous criminals was terrible, and he stammered out something of his thoughts.

The colonel glanced at him quickly, and nodded.

"Only a woman of the finest pluck and the most indomitable spirit could have done it. The strain must have been tremendous," he said. "However, we couldn't have brought things to a head without her help."

"To play the spy — on the people who thought she was their friend!" stammered Gerard.

"That's not exactly the case," returned the colonel

in a voice too low for his niece to hear. "She helped to keep the house going. I know, for we supplied the money."

Gerard uttered an exclamation.

Then he sat back as if stunned.

"Then she is — a detective!" he almost gasped.

"Well, she has been acting in that capacity," admitted Colonel Ormsby. "I wish she would go on with the career. She began it at my suggestion, on my fervent advice. She has been a great success, an unparalleled success. If you were wise, you, as I understand, have great influence with her, would advise her to keep on with it."

Gerard said nothing. He did not see the look of keen anxiety on the face of Rachel, who had gathered some part of their conversation, and who knew what the subject was that they were discussing.

They went on in silence until Piccadilly was reached. Then the colonel turned to his niece.

"My dear, where are you going to stay to-night? Will you put up at my hotel?"

She shook her head.

"I've kept on the lodgings in Duke Street," said she. "I think I'll go there. And you can come and see me in the morning, and take me to Lady Jennings'. I can't feel happy till I've told the dear old thing everything."

"Very well, my dear. Then I'll tell Marks to drive to Duke Street."

They drove on, and Miss Davison was helped out by the gentlemen, and Gerard thanked the colonel for having brought him so far on his way, and let the car drive away without him.

For Miss Davison had given him a look which he took for permission to speak to her. And as the car drove down the street, they walked up it, side by side, in the quiet night.

"Now," said she, with a weary air of being glad to get rid of a burden, "you know everything. You can see why it was impossible for me to tell you anything. I was under promise — oath — not to let any creature on earth know what I was and what my work was. I was fully sheltered by the fact that it was my uncle who had started me on this most distasteful but most remunerative career, and though I have often asked him to release me, he has always refused until I could assist in carrying out some sensational feat, to justify, as he said, his choice of me for this career."

"And he has released you now?"

"Of course. If he had not, you would have known nothing, you would have been told nothing."

"You might have trusted me," said Gerard reproachfully.

She turned upon him quickly.

"I could trust no one," she said. "A word, nay, a look, while I was living under the same roof with a gang of dangerous criminals, might have been death to me. I knew that, while I was staying with them,

I carried my life in my hand. It was by far the worst experience I have ever had, and I could not have gone through with it, could not have stood the strain of being always on the watch for the proofs which I had to hoard up to communicate to the police, but for my uncle's promise that it should be the last, the very last thing he would call upon me to do."

Gerard involuntarily heaved a deep sigh of thankfulness.

"And you have done with it?" he said.

"Yes."

His tone grew harder.

"For the time, that is, of course. You will probably find your way back when you are asked by the friends you have formed. It was Cecil Jones who accompanied you everywhere, wasn't it? When you detected pickpockets in a crowd, and handed him the stolen property? When you accompanied him to the police station to give evidence against the shop-lifter at the stores —"

"You thought *I* was the shop-lifter!" said Miss Davison demurely.

"Well, I know better now. As I say, you always had this Jones —"

"Whose name is not Jones at all."

"Well, you had this fellow who calls himself Jones to help you and to stand by you."

"Yes. My uncle, who gives advice to the police in important cases still, though he has practically re-

tired, picked out this man as one he could rely upon to help me."

"And now I suppose you will marry him?" said Gerard fiercely.

Miss Davison looked demurely down on the pavement.

"He has a wife," she said, "and three, if not four, children."

"Thank God!"

Miss Davison suddenly stopped and held out her hand.

"Good-night," said she, "Mr. Buckland, and — good-bye."

He took her hand and held it in his own, which was trembling.

"Must it be good-bye, Rachel?" he said hoarsely.

"Surely," said she, with a little forced, weary laugh, "you don't want to remain a friend of an ex-detective!"

Gerard burst into a tirade of which the salient features were that he would have remained her friend if she had actually been one of the gang themselves, if she had been a card-sharper, if she had been a shop-lifter, if she had been a pick-pocket. He loved her, and he knew that, whatever she might have done, she would never have been anything at heart but the noble and good woman whom he loved as he had always done.

He behaved indeed so irrationally, he expressed his love and devotion in so many impassioned and absurd speeches, he looked so earnest and he spoke so tenderly, that Miss Davison, if she could in any case have held out till morning, was softened, and gave way there and then. Gave way, that is to say, to the extent of telling him that he was an absurd boy, and that he might, if he liked, and if he had nothing better to do, take her to see Lady Jennings on the following day.

And, as there was no one in the street, she let him kiss her when he said good-night.

THE END